

Ash Wednesday Sermon 5 March 2014, 6pm

Is 58:1-12; Mt 6:1-6, 16-21

Cake or death. An easy question. Oddly Lenten, you might say. If you've given up cake for Lent, that is. In which case it's not easy at all.

So how about another question that is like it. If you had something trumpeted about your life, what would it be? Would it be how great you are? Or would it be how many things you got wrong?

Because there are trumpets in both our readings today. God calls Isaiah to trumpet the sins of the Israelites. Not easy – who likes anyone pointing out their errors, not only to them, but in front of other people? And on the other hand, Jesus isn't impressed by those who trumpet their generosity, those who want to show others what righteous people they are. "Look at me, how much I'm giving to charity". Not beautiful. We're caught between the two trumpets.

We want to control how other people see us. We often care about our image. And to some extent, Jesus says, yes we should. We should go round with washed faces and clean hair, he says in Matthew. We shouldn't wander round looking grubby as if we are fasting or as if we've taken a holy vow of poverty - which may be the case, but we needn't tell the world about it. And we shouldn't be overly concerned about *not* being overly concerned about our appearance – that's not going to get anyone anywhere. We don't need to worry about being the king or queen of fashion, but we can just look, smell, sound decent, says Jesus. So as not to draw attention to ourselves, at the expense of God, or other people.

But we do usually care what other people think of us, beyond just being decent human beings. Are we beautiful, fit, glamorous, having a good hair day, strong, funny, attractive? Do people think we are clever, good at our subjects, wise, excellent Christians, prayerful and holy, friendly, sensible, with great career prospects, successful, talented, respected, people to gather around, and so on? I imagine that's often the case with you lot. Because you are great, and special. But rather than worrying about what is trumpeted about us, what other

people know about us, we are called to care for being ourselves. And being ourselves means first and foremost being the beloved children of God, rather than having as our primary aim seeking to be people whom the world looks up to.

We can't control everything – but we try to. We can't actually control what other people think of us – but we do our best. Above all, we can't be ourselves, we can't be the beloved children of God, if we think we can do that by somehow leaving God out of the equation. We can't be the beloved children of God if we don't accept that we are not in charge, but God is.

God sees all of us. God sees our goodness – we don't need anyone else to know it. And God sees our badness – we can't keep secrets from God. God sees in secret, Jesus tells us in Matthew. God knows best who we are, what we are like. We can't control what God thinks of us. We can't, as Isaiah points out, just expect God to see our good deeds and not know what lies behind the outward show. God knows what really matters to us.

God wants us to be honest about what matters to us, and to recognise that the only thing that really should matter to us is that God loves us. For all our mistakes, our selfishness, our habits of putting ourselves first, God loves us. We can't control that. It's not up to us. It doesn't matter how we try to present ourselves, what we trumpet about our lives. God knows.

That is the oppression that true fasting is to shake off. The weight of worldly cares. The anxiety of wanting to control other people. The angst of always worrying about how we are seen in the eyes of the world. Don't get concerned about that, says God in Isaiah. Just be concerned about being the loved children of God alongside other loved children of God.

Let this Lent be a time when you deepen your awareness of yourselves. When you realise the worldly cares that are stopping you being truly you, and that are getting in the way of you and God. When you realise that you're not capable of everything and nor should you try to be. When you realise that all you can really try and do is be humble human beings. You don't have to be great in the eyes of the world to be great in the eyes of God. You just have to be little, and human, and in relationship with God. A lighter yoke indeed. An easier

fast. We can do our best to be faithful, but our own efforts are not the be all and end all, and never will be. God's in control, not you. It's what God does, who God is, that matters.

Let's be open with ourselves, let's acknowledge what does matter to us, and let's acknowledge what should matter to us above all else. We're not great, but God is. Let's be wholly open with God, and open to God.