

**Wednesday 14 February 2024, Ash Wednesday, Choral Eucharist**

**Isaiah 58:1-12, Matthew 6.1-6, 16-21**

**The Revd Dr Evan McWilliams**

The fabulously named nineteenth-century peacher Octavius Winslow once said 'Christ is the golden thread which runs through the whole [Bible]! The Old Testament predicts the New; and the New fulfills the Old; and so both unite in testifying, "Truly, this is the Son of God!"' From the beginning, the Church has acknowledged this truth, that Christ is the beginning and the end of the scriptures just as he is the beginning and the end of all things, our Alpha and Omega.

What the Church has not always been so clear about are the other 'golden threads' that run through the Bible. I want to catch hold of one of those threads today- plain, I hope, from our readings- and consider it for a moment, even as we bow our hearts in humble worship before the one who is our greatest golden treasure.

This golden thread is the thread of right-hearted religion. Ponder that phrase for a moment: 'right-hearted religion.' In our first reading from Isaiah, we find the complaint that God does not hear his people. *Why do we fast, but you do not see? Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?* The answer comes rather bluntly:

*Look, you serve your own interest on your fast-day, and oppress all your workers. Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to strike with a wicked fist. Such fasting as you do today will not make your voice heard on high.*

You seem to be doing the right thing, says the prophet, but you do it wrong-heartedly. Even while you fast, offering your apparent obedience to God, you oppress your workers and you fight with one another, disobeying what God says about how to treat one another. God, says Isaiah, is not interested in your fasting because it is meaningless religiosity. You make an outward show of faith but your lives do not demonstrate the fruit of faith, which is goodness and justice.

This objection on the part of God to hypocritical religious behaviour is not limited to Isaiah. We hear of it in Deuteronomy and Jeremiah, in Amos and in other places also. God does not listen to us because we are trying to lie to him. Such religion is not right-hearted. Instead God says through the prophet,

*Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? ... Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer; you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am.*

What we read in the Old Testament we find confirmed in the New: God does not appreciate and does not accept the worship or prayer of hypocrites. This is spoken of by Jesus time and time again, including in our Gospel reading: *Beware of practising your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven.* Instead, Jesus says, *When you give alms, do not let*

*your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.*

If you do good when no one is watching, simply because you love God and wish to please him, your religion is true. When you do it for the betterment of others and not to receive praise, God will reward you. Right-hearted religion is as much a part of the teaching of Jesus Christ the eternal Son of God as it is of the prophets. This golden thread should occupy our thoughts as we examine ourselves and receive the mark of the cross on our foreheads. Will God hear and reward me if I seek the approval of others? No, he will not. Will Jesus hear and bless me if I lie to his face and offer a form of worship without the substance of right action? No, he will not.

This is a hard teaching. But it lies at the core of Jesus' understanding of being right with God. And his teaching is not new, but it is in complete continuity with that of the prophets. Right-hearted religion is a golden thread that cannot be broken. Today, let us pray that our hearts may always be inclined to please God rather than others, that our religion may not be hypocritical outward show, and that our every offering of worship and work may be characterised by right-heartedness before the one who made us and gifts us our every breath. Amen.