

Ash Wednesday

PAEANS AND PAYDAYS, or GETTING LUTHERANS TO FAST

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

Ash Wednesday

Analysis by Jerome Burce

1 'Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven. 2 'So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. 3 But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, 4 so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. 5 'And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. 6 But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. 16 'And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. 17 But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, 18 so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. 19 'Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; 20 but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust

consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. 21 For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

On Two Key Words:

- *"Reward" appears above both as a noun (vv. 1, 2, 3, 16) and as a verb (vv. 4, 6, 18). Behind the noun lies the Greek "misthos," the plainer meaning of which is "pay" or "wages" as in the parable of the laborers in the vineyard who at day's end are handed their "misthos" (20:8). Behind the verb is "apodidomi." Down to earth types might read that as "to pay up" or "to fork over," the thing paid or forked being the "misthos."*
- *"Hypocrite" (vv. 2, 5, 16) is a direct carryover from the Greek "hypokrites" which, tugged apart, gives "under" (hypo-) and "judge" (-krites). While we'll play with that below, herewith the truer etymology: 'c.1225, from O.Fr. ypocrisie, from L.L. hypocrisis, from Gk. hypokrisis "acting on the stage, pretense," from hypokrinesthai "play a part, pretend," also "answer," from hypo- "under" + middle voice of krinein "to sift, decide" (see crisis). The sense evolution is from "separate gradually" to "answer" to "answer a fellow actor on stage" to "play a part." Thus hypocrite (c. 1225) is ult. Gk. hypokrites "actor on the stage, pretender"' (www.etymonline.com).*

DIAGNOSIS: I Am So Beautiful

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *Old Habits Admired*

What's more pathetic than a public hypocrite? Answer: a private one, that is, a person who struts his stuff in front of the mirror of his own mind; whose big payoff for pieties rendered is his own hand reaching over to pat his own back. Meet Larry Lutheran–Billy Baptist too, perhaps, though better that he and members of the other Christian tribes should speak for themselves. We Larrys, at least–Lucilles too–will find ourselves bemused this Ash Wednesday as we usually are by an odd juxtaposition of events: first the dust and ashes business, then the reading out of a text that will tempt us to regard the prior exercise as irrelevant and a waste of our time. After all, if there's anything that Larry has long since nailed cold it's this present word of Jesus, bred as it were in his Lutheran bones. He doesn't strut. He flaunts nothing. He makes a fetish about keeping his giving private–not even the pastor should know–and if he's pious enough to pray over his food at a restaurant he does so surreptitiously for fear the waitress will notice. The word about fasting is quite beside the point, of course. Fasting is what Catholics do and he isn't one of them. Indeed the closer he listens this night the likelier he is to feel quite pleased with himself. Ditto for the folks around him. Payday!

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *The Self-Approving Heart*

Another oddity: no stage or film director would think "Lutheran" as she cast around for the quintessential America. Tonight, however, Larry is exactly that, the tides of his tradition meeting the prevailing winds of the broader culture to form a storm of self-effacing self-congratulation that would do a John Wayne proud. At the heart of the attitude's paradox lies a fundamental conviction that self-respecting (sic!) individuals require the approval of neither God nor man, nor woman either. Hence our scorn for fops and showboaters whose folly is not, contra Jesus, that they despise God but rather that they despise

themselves. Real men play to an audience of one. They serve as their own judge and jury. They also act as their own bankers, “storing up for themselves” the treasure of their self-esteem (v. 19). Real women do that too these days. So does Larry as he sits there in church sizing himself up. His conclusion: if Jesus means what he says (v. 4, 6, 18) then he, Larry, has hit heavenly pay dirt. God owes him, all the more since he’s bragging about this to no one but himself.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *A Rotten Deal*

Hypocrites, public and private, have this in common: their preferred judges all die. Thus the import of the Ash Wednesday rite and the word it preaches: “Dust you are. To dust you shall return.” Never was word more inescapably true; whence the tingle as the words are uttered and the ashes rubbed home. Too bad for Larry that both sermon and rite precede this text in the usual Lutheran order for the day. It leaves him open to missing the horrid point, that having selected himself as sole admirer and paymaster he has signed up for the worst of deals, a doom more dire still than the one awaiting those lesser fools who played to a public. Their audience lives on, however briefly. In Larry’s case the adulation ceases the moment he’s dead; unless one counts the praise of the worms as they munch away on the treasure of his back-patting hand (v. 19). And that’s not all. Having spurned a better, more honest judge, it will not help him “in that day” to say “Lord, Lord.” The certain answer: “Do I know you? Beat it, you evildoer!” (7:22-23).

PROGNOSIS: Jesus Priceless Treasure

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *The Real Deal*

Against “that day” stands this day, when help is at hand. It comes from today’s Speaker, the one who followed through on his own words by laying up treasure not on earth but in heaven (v. 20), doing so not for himself but “for us and for our salvation”

(Nicene Creed). Specifically, for us he fasted (4:2), for us he prayed (14:23; 26:39, 42, 44), for us he gave the alms of his blood and breath (26:28; 27:50). All this he did “in secret” under the cloak of the crowd’s misperception and unbelief. Mockery was his earthly pay (27:27-31, 39-44). So was flogging and crucifixion (27:26, 35). Through all this he remembered for us, because we do not for ourselves, that the One seeing in secret was not the God who owed him but always and only “my Father” (26:39, v. 4, 6, 18) whose will for his Son—and children—is entirely trustworthy, any and all appearances to the contrary (6:32; 7:9-11). The upshot? Payday, the Real Deal, known otherwise as Easter, and with it the Father’s forking over of “all authority in heaven and on earth” (28:18)—talk about treasure!—on which the Lord will happily draw this night to pardon the lese majeste of feckless, pathetic Larry.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *The Self-Negating Heart*

With Jesus’ pardon comes Jesus’ power to stand up and stride the earth not as “real men,” phony American style, but as bona fide children of God who have a home to go to (9:7) and the Father’s work to do in the meantime (21:28). “Lord of the Rings” fans will think here of Strider, the heir Aragorn in ranger’s mufti. That would be Larry as the words of Christ’s pardon sink in and give new strength to an alternative conviction, not the one bred in his bones but the one branded on his heart by Word and Spirit on the day he was baptized. This other conviction smacks too of paradox. It is an effacing confidence, a faith that may well drive Larry to shush and scold himself in a cascade of gloriously acidic words that will eat away like moth and rust at his stupid little treasure (v. 19) “Shame on you,” says he to himself—in secret, of course. “Would you bask in your own praise? Pay yourself a penny when Christ has just signed over his check for eternal life? Idiot!” Such things mumbled, he

rises from his pew and strides forward with joy to meet his destiny in the body broken for him and the “blood of the new covenant poured out for many” (26:28), of whom he is certainly one. Christ Jesus has said so. The sacramental pat on the back confirms this. Payday! The Real Deal again, this time Larry’s, God in Christ being ever so pleased with him.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : A New Discipline Tackled

Lent follows. And Larry prays, and keeps dropping his envelopes in the collection plate. Maybe in these six weeks there’s an extra gift or two and the extra praying that comes of attending Lenten midweek services. Again, it’s the bred-in-the-bones Lutheran thing, though perhaps with the difference that this time around he has quit keeping score of how nicely he’s doing with that Ash Wednesday text. And if with an eye on Christ he forgoes this deliberately, then Larry the Lutheran is finally keeping a fast, indeed the only fast worth keeping. It’s the one that starves hypocrisy by refusing to snack on earthly approval of any kind, public or private, lest it diminish one’s appetite for the multi-course banquet of God’s approval in Christ. This is a tough fast to keep, to be sure. Larry will likely do it poorly, in the fits, starts, and stumbles that constitute our present Christian life. To give muscle to his faith and to strengthen the fast let him practice seeing as the Father sees in secret. Let him notice, that is, how even the out-loud swaggering hypocrite that his Lutheran bones despise is precious to God beyond understanding, worth nothing less than the Son’s dying breath. To confess this of the phony other is to know it for one’s phony self; and in this Christ is glorified, the Father honored, the neighbor well-served. Payday all over again, only this time it’s Larry’s hand that’s passing around the checks.