

Sermon for Ash Wednesday, 13 February 2013, St James, Cambridge
The Revd. Geoffrey Howard

Lectionary Readings:

Joel 2.1-2,12-17

Psalm 51.1-18

2 Corinthians 5.20b-6.10

Matthew 6. 1 – 6, 16 - 21

There are three obligations laid upon practising Jews and Muslims. Within their communities to ignore them would be to make a nonsense of their religious beliefs. Take them away and their religion lacks substance, it is an empty shell. Alms giving, prayer and fasting are essential requirements of both Judaism and Islam.

Some years ago Rita and I were guests of a Muslim family in Tarsus, one Sunday afternoon we received an invitation to meet the local, secular judge and his family. We were welcomed into their home by his son, an assured, Western-educated young man, who was a prospective member of the Turkish Olympic team. His first words after greeting us was to apologise for his father's absence, he was saying his prayers, but he would join us immediately he had finished. I was impressed, not that his father was saying his prayers, but that his sophisticated son was so matter-of-fact about it. He might have been apologising that his father was taking an important phone call. His very casualness was a testimony to the part prayer played in that household.

Another young man impressed me even more when we were on the bus travelling back to Istanbul from Ankara. He was anything but Western, a romantic looking Eastern character with hair to his shoulders, a carefully trimmed beard, and wearing a long, embroidered suede coat, baggy trousers and high boots, all of which looked of excellent quality. He had hardly settled into his seat before he opened a large box of Turkish Delight, stood up, went round the bus and offered everyone a piece before having any himself. As with the Judge's son what impressed me most was his simplicity, absence of any ostentation and no sign of

any self-consciousness, of doing anything special. Imagine the embarrassment if this had happened on an English bus.

I left Turkey knowing that I had been in a society where prayer and the generous sharing of your good things with others were as natural as eating and drinking – and of course in Islam fasting – of which the 30 days of Ramadan is the most extreme expression - is an integral part. And for the devout Jew also the three great pillars on which the good life is based are almsgiving, prayer and fasting.

Like all religious practises they may be abused, our Lord was scathing at their abuse by the Pharisees, but what strikes me most about our Lord's words is that he seems to take for granted that they will be an essential part of his follower's lives also. He does not say, *If ever you give alms, if ever you pray, if ever you fast*, he says, *Whenever*. Like those young Muslims I encountered in Turkey he takes it for granted that this will be a normal, commonplace, routine part of his followers' lives. This was certainly so in the the Early Church.

So the problem that Lent presents is that of making special and rare what should be ordinary and commonplace. During the forty days of Lent we spend a little more time over your prayers, we give a little extra to charity, we deny ourselves of some pleasure such as chocolate or alcohol and - if you are like me - when Easter comes you say, *Thank goodness Lent is over*, open a bottle of champagne and forget about it for another year.

Does that mean we should discard Lent? No! Lent is good, despite this danger: Lent reminds me of my failing to live up to the everyday obligations of my faith. I am in need of that reminder. Lent is also an opportunity to begin new habits of self-denial, or to strengthen existing habits that are weak. And that is never a bad thing.

I wish you a good and continuing Lent.

