

Ash Wednesday 6pm Sermon

Matthew 6.1-6, 16-21

For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

Sermon

The great Irish poet and theologian John O'Donohue gave a talk at the Greenbelt festival some years ago where he asked this question; "What do you think about all day?"

It is a testing question, that goes to the heart of our identity and our preoccupations.

In the same way, Jesus asked his followers, "what reward are you seeking?" or we might frame it another way "what are your drivers?"

O'Donohue's simple diagnostic tool can reveal uncomfortable truths.

You may discover, as I have done, that you don't think about the things you think you think about! There is a lot of noise in my head caused by too much Radio 4 news, too many games on the phone, too much distraction from minor irritations. This is not the place for the preacher to engage in inappropriate soul-searching confessional – I have a spiritual director for that – but needless to say, there are deeper and darker truths revealed when I do this exercise honestly in private.

May I encourage you to do the same?

Discover where your treasure is by asking, what do I think about, and pay attention to the truth of the answer. You might ask yourself, what would Jesus say about where my treasure lies.

Imagine yourself in a crowd that includes among it Pharisees and Sadducees, pious Jews who are meticulous in their following of the law, right down to the tithing of every seed from the garden, and the washing of every pot in the kitchen.

They think that they are driven by wanting to please God. Jesus suggests that they are really more interested in the good opinion of their neighbours. If they were really interested in pleasing God, they would do all these things in private, and their neighbours would never know.

Imagine yourself in a crowd that includes among it merchants and prosperous business people, Jews who strive for success in the world. They believe that God is rewarding them for their skill, their acuity, their family loyalty.

They may think that they are driven by the desire to do well and to care for family or neighbour. Jesus suggests that they are really more interested in money for its own sake. Money has become a distraction, and they have lost sight of the important things in life.

Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

So, we can spend time this Lent in the work of diagnosis, asking about the state of our souls, checking on the health of our hearts, asking "where is my treasure?"

Once we have the diagnosis, where are we to find the cure?

Before I continue, may I give a small health warning? Much of what I am going to say draws on the assumption that you are someone who can both hear with your inner ear and see with your mind's eye. I am aware that for a proportion of people, these things are not possible. If you are one of those people, hold on until the end of the sermon for some practical advice that may be helpful to you.

The passage following the one we read this evening is the reflection on the birds of the air and the lilies of the field that ends, "strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well."

Here is the cure, "strive for the Kingdom of God".

Make your medicine to increase the amount of time you think about the Kingdom of God, make that your priority.

How can we learn to focus our thoughts differently?

Well, one thing is for sure, the harder you try not to think about something the more difficult it becomes. If I were to say, don't think about pink elephants, I am pretty sure that an image would sail into your head immediately, and I'm sorry if it is the only thing you will remember from this sermon.

But, if you replace the pink elephants with a field of pink lilies you could meditate on those lilies, spend time looking at that field in your mind's eye, with that phrase from Jesus running through your head. "consider the lilies of the field, they neither toil nor spin".

You might find a picture, a photograph, a painting or an icon that would enable you to focus for a short time each day on the Kingdom of God. You may know the lovely painting by Stanley Spencer, part of the series called Jesus in the wilderness, which shows Jesus kneeling down admiring a little clump of pink daisies. Another in the series has Jesus sheltering a hen and her chicks in the crook of his arm.

Or you might just stick with a phrase, or a short passage of scripture, and roll it round and round for the next forty days.

There are many prayer and meditation practices that encourage the repeated use of a single phrase, including the so-called Jesus prayer "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me a sinner."

I think of these phrases a bit like a broom, that sweeps the detritus out from the corners of our minds and begins to polish them and bring light into them.

If, like me, you find it difficult to memorise words, why not just print them out, or write them on a postcard, and commit to reading them and meditating on them at the same time each day? I've chosen a passage from Paul's letter to the Corinthians for this Lent and I'm going to read it first thing each morning, as an encouragement to be kinder and more compassionate.

Our heads are full of treasures, snatches of song, lines from poetry, remembered places. My invitation to you this Lent is to add to those treasures, remembering those words of Jesus. Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

Amen