

Wednesday, 2 March 2022
Ash Wednesday
The Rev'd Dr Mariama Ifode-Blease
'I can see you. Can you see me?'

May I speak in the name of the triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. **Amen.**

Travel can be a challenge when you're four feet eleven inches and three quarters tall. There are the racks above your head, annoyingly too high. There is the fact that you are, more often than not, in someone's armpit on an overcrowded tube. Then there is also, of course, the arrival. You're on a packed train station platform and the people waiting for you cannot see you among the crowds of people. Someone waiting for me calls and says: *I can see you, can you see me? I reply: I am behind the tall bloke in the purple jumpsuit. No, not there. Over here!*

This is one of the many reasons why I like wearing bright pink wellies. It has helped family and friends over the years to locate me as I descended from busy public transport.

I can see you? Can you see me? Jesus' words in today's gospel reading frame our season of Lent with a reminder that being seen is not as important as who you are being seen by. In an age of mass media consumption and in which virtue signalling is a thing, being seen can increase your profile, given you some influence at one level and, for the few, pay the bills.

Yet we read in Matthew chapter 6:

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. But 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.

Jesus goes against the grain of some of the big calls of modern living. The world often tells us to shout out about our giving and show that we are good and kind and generous. Yes, you may say, it is good to be a positive example, to inspire and encourage others to make better choices, but Jesus isn't talking about that. He is talking about how our acts connect to being made new in God, to being faithful to God and to being held in a loving embrace by a creator that sees us, *really sees us*.

I can see you, can you see me?

This is what God is saying to us through the person of Jesus Christ. I can see your giving and your serving and what that is really about. I can see who you are doing all that for, and I am not sure it is for me. I am not sure it is for love.

We read again in Matthew chapter 6:

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. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, 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.

The spiritual practice of fasting, common to several world religions, can focus the mind on God, through the prayer, reading and meditation that wrap and hold the several hours of intentional food deprivation. It can allow us to focus on our minds and bodies. But fasting is not for everyone. It should not be abused, and it should never be undertaken without careful thought, planning, and guidance.

What Jesus points to are spiritual practices that become more about what we want others to see and less about how we reveal ourselves to God. More about facade and less about inner alignment with our loving Creator. More about the performative, and less about authenticity. And Jesus rightly holds up the mirror and says I can see you? I see you and what you're doing here. But can you see me?

Today is Ash Wednesday and we mark our foreheads with ash, having burnt our palms from last year's Palm Sunday. We do this to remind ourselves that it starts here. It starts and restarts here, in the intimacy of you and God, of us and God, of me and God. In the seeing, in the being seen, in the knowing and in the being known. The ash on our forehead tells us that we get things wrong, but that as, Lucy reminded us recently, "change is possible, and repentance is within our grasp."

In 2019, the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford advertised their new exhibition 'Last Supper in Pompeii' with a strap line inviting people to come and see and learn about "the ancient Roman city of Pompeii's love affair with food and wine."¹ Of course I had to go and see this for myself. There I saw carbonised bread from AD 79, and olive oil, hardened though preserved, food and drink geologically stored in time, bodies held as if in a mould. All this the result of the eruption of Mount Vesuvius, covering all before it in volcanic lava and ash.

There are different types of ash, I have learnt. There is volcanic ash, "a mixture of rock, mineral, and glass particles...with its [very hard] particles, and usually with jagged edges". This sort of ash "can cause eye, nose, and lung irritation, as well as breathing problems".² This, I believe, is not the ash on our forehead, or that through which we are asked to look and see the forty days of Lent. Because there is another type of ash, ash from organic material.

The Royal Horticultural Society tells us that "ash from wood fires, such as bonfires or wood burning stoves, can be a useful additive to the compost heap or can be applied directly to fallow ground and dug in." This ash "can be a natural source of potassium and trace elements. It also has a liming effect, so wood ash can remedy excessively acidic soils".³ From this ash new life can grow. From this ash we can see the possibility to replant, remake, be transformed, and be moved towards the light and love of God. It is in this ash in which God looks for us. God looks for us. *Can you see me*, asks God. *Because I can see you*.

¹ <https://www.ashmolean.org/pompeii>

² <https://www.nationalgeographic.org/encyclopedia/volcanic-ash/>

³ <https://www.rhs.org.uk/soil-composts-mulches/wood-ash-using-in-garden>

It is in this ash, in the dark, burnt remnants, in the what-is-left; it is from this ash, rooted in the earth, from which we can be made new, and through which we can be seen anew. We are not asked to roll in this ash and bury ourselves in shame. We are asked to recognise that we are seen, *we are seen and still loved*. And because of this, we can start to see others, to bring light to the things that have been unseen, and in the words of Isaiah chapter 58: 6

to loose the bonds of injustice,
to undo the thongs of the yoke,
to let the oppressed go free,
and to break every yoke.

We are given permission to grieve for what we have not done, for what we have failed to do and we are given permission to try again. To try again to love, to give, to serve, to heal.

Can you see me, says Jesus? Because I can see you, and I can see all that you have been, and are, and will be.

God waits for us to see ourselves as we are seen, and to know that our daily being and becoming are held in God's transforming love.

Amen.