

The Hidden Room

a sermon preached on

Ash Wednesday

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at

St Luke's in the City

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Lections: Joel 2:1-2,12-17; 2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10; Matthew 6:1-6,16-21

“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.”¹ ‘Secret’ is probably not the most helpful English translation of the Greek, since it’s likely to conjure up thoughts of spies and movies and the Pentagon - all very dramatic! Matthew’s word literally means ‘to hide’, but not in the cops-and-robbers, gossip-magazine sense. The same Greek word *κρυπτο* *kryptō* gives us the English name for the 36th element in the Periodic Table, Krypton – the ‘hidden’ Noble gas discovered in 1898, a constituent of air at just 1 part per million. The creators of the Superman comic presumably drew upon this ‘hiddenness’ in the famous naming of the mysterious and lethal substance ‘Kryptonite’, said to have come from the distant planet Kyrpton. God remains for humans hidden, in the sense that complete and absolute knowledge of God is not humanly possible. Though God has made Godself known in the person of Jesus, nevertheless the Scriptures attest over and again to God’s ultimate hiddenness. Furthermore, neither can humans force God out into the open - only God can reveal God’s-self. To see God, like being exposed to kryptonite, is fatal. Nevertheless, we humans are made to search for God, as Saint Augustine famously observed: “You have made our hearts restless, until they find their rest in you.”

This search for God, which is our search for meaning and purpose and ultimate truth, requires a life-long process of evolution of consciousness, a heroic and arduous journey from infantile and tribal ways into truly adult ways. In this ‘sermon on the mount’ Jesus demonstrated that he knew that times of suffering and crisis are inevitable in human evolution.² When we face crises we crave anything that will make us forget the suffering or relieve the pressure.³ And Jesus knew that those who undergo times of crisis must not be anaesthetised against the suffering, and in order to endure the suffering creatively must fast.⁴ Though tribal religion thinks only of fasting as exclusively to do with food,⁵ this is in fact a reductive cop-out. Indeed, as Jesus observed, fasting from certain foods can even be a means by which I attempt to persuade God that I am pious and worthy whilst avoiding weightier matters.⁶ Talk, reading, excessive activity, entertainment, addictions of many kinds, including the addictions to work, excitement, property, security and productivity are all potential means by which we attempt to avoid the inner crisis of the soul - which feels as deadly to us as Kryptonite to Superman.

Ironically, prayer, too, can be a means of avoidance. Caught in ego-centricity, our prayer can be an attempt to use God in the service of ego. This is to mistake entirely the meaning of Jesus’ teaching that we should ask God for whatever it is that we *need*,⁷ and instead to ask for what we self-centredly *want*. Prayer can be a means of regression into an infantile state, or for tribal comfort and security. The former is to mistake Jesus’ instruction about becoming like a child in order to enter the Kingdom of Heaven.⁸ The latter is the prayer of religious sects and nations alike calling on God to bless the tribal identity over against the perceived threatening outsider. Every nation’s national anthem is perilously close to this kind of infantile-tribal prayer.

¹ Matthew 6:6

² Matthew 5:10,11

³ These reflections draw upon Fritz Kunkel’s commentary: *Creation Continues: A Psychological Interpretation of the Gospel of Matthew*, Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1987, pp50-57.

⁴ Matthew 6:16

⁵ Matthew 9:14-17;12:2; 23:23

⁶ Matthew 6:5,7; 23:23-24

⁷ Matthew 7:7-11

⁸ Matthew 18:3

“Whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is hidden; and your Father who sees in hiddenness will reward you.” The greater the urge to talk more, to eat more, to be entertained more, to read more, to have more, to be more productive, to be more secure, and so on, and so on, the more pressing is our need of fasting, of being empty from the external point of view. For if we do not fast when it is needed by our soul our inner contents leak out, prematurely relieving the building pressure. That which properly belongs to the hidden places in our soul is inappropriately spurted out where it does not belong - sometimes like casting pearls before swine, at other times causing harm to ourselves and others. ⁹

But when we pray to God who is in the hidden place in our souls, the One who resides in the hidden place rewards us. The reward is this: our inner forces are confined, the pressure builds, the creative, evolutionary development will be undertaken. A pressure cooker only works when the lid is sealed. A nuclear reactor can only work when the fission reaction is tightly contained. The inner forces of the soul, when confined to the hidden place, act in a centripetal direction. Remove the pressure cooker’s lid and there’s no cooking. Penetrate the nuclear reactor’s containment and not only does the reaction cease but destructive forces are unleashed. When the inner forces of the soul are not contained they flood out unproductively, uncreatively, perhaps destructively even, in unpredictable directions.

All of us must face, sooner or later, ‘40 days’ of the kind of crisis and suffering we would never choose for ourselves – and some individuals seem to be mysteriously called to face such crises and sufferings more than once, or indeed for much of a lifetime. Desert. Hospital. Prison. Homelessness. Bankruptcy. Unemployment. Accident. Illness. Isolation. There are as many ways of being propelled into the hidden place in the soul as there are uniquely different humans. “Whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is hidden; and your Father who sees in hiddenness will reward you.”

In the creative fasting that contains the inner forces of the soul, in hiddenness, we come to discover that the true temple of the Holy Spirit is inside ourselves. ¹⁰ We can enter the ‘holy of holies’ which is our own soul - but not as a spectacle for others. We cannot make contact with Eternity, with the God whom our hearts seek, unless we contain and confine the vast creative energies within the hiddenness of our own soul. From the point of view of ego this feels like an emptiness. From the soul’s point of view this is true and life-giving fullness. This is the hidden inner room to which at certain times we must withdraw. Lent is the church’s symbol for this necessary withdrawal to the hidden room, for the sake of the new development in the soul.

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⁹ Matthew 7:6

¹⁰ Matthew 21:6; 26:61; Mark 14:58; 1 Corinthians 6:19