

## A LIFE APART

### Ash Wednesday, 2012 – Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

I was well along in the first summer of a three-summer course in Orff Music Pedagogy before I learned my favourite professor, Jos Wuytack, was a Jesuit. I knew that he was a professor at the LemmensInstitut in Leuven, Belgium and a devoted student of the elemental approach to music discovered by Carl Orff in the mid-1930's. All of this information was given in the Royal Conservatory of Music summer school syllabus. But the fact that Jos was a member of the Society of Jesus was something people had to discover from him through conversation. He never wore clericals to class; for the duration of the summer course in Toronto he had a room at the Park Plaza, not a cell at Loyola House; the music we studied had no Christian subtext; he wore no jewelry, no crosses, crucifixes, or rings, that would identify him as a priest. No one could accuse him of practising his piety before others in order to be seen by them. But he was over-brimming with energy, creativity, joy, and a playfulness appropriate for someone whose focus was teaching music for young children. And although he was a published composer, he was never self-promoting. Instead, he would bring recordings to class of compositions his university students in Belgium had written and performed – music for children taken to the next level, so to speak. He delighted in their accomplishments.

My graduating year from the course was Jos's final year on the summer school faculty, and one of the local students invited all of the professors and students to a reception at her home to honour Jos and say thank you to all the faculty.

At the reception, I had a chance to talk with Jos and ask him what the future held for him, given that he would no longer be coming to Canada to teach. He told me that it was not just the summer school he was leaving, but also his career as a teacher in Belgium, not permanently, but for 10 years. "Ten years!" I exclaimed. "Yes," he answered. "I have concentrated on teaching for the past ten years, publishing, conducting, and making music publicly. Now I need to balance all this extroversion with writing, meditating, playing the organ, and painting."

I have reflected often on that conversation. Being a Jesuit, Jos had the option of taking what we might call a ten-year sabbatical. The culture of a religious community encourages and values the interior life. For most of us, though, we have to work at incorporating contemplation and religious discipline into our daily routines. There is always something, it seems, calling for our attention, even during our leisure hours. And prayer, fasting, and good works – three of the four marks of Lent, incidentally – don't fit easily into the cracks of our daily agenda.

And so, once a year, we are challenged by Jesus in our Ash Wednesday Gospel to try harder; to examine the life of discipleship as he describes it in these few verses we read from the Sermon on the Mount, and measure ourselves against them; to contemplate the Jewish resistance to assimilation determined by the law of Moses and ask ourselves how Jesus' instruction, in parallel with the law of Moses and arranged so beautifully in Matthew's gospel, determines *our* life apart as *Christians*. The ashes, which will shortly be placed on our brow, are not a sign of our righteousness, but rather a sign of our struggle for righteousness. Being a disciple of Jesus, living a life apart, suggests conflict, perhaps even battle with the human nature so ably described in the examples Jesus presents for his first-century followers. Vanity And Money could be the subtitle of this lesson.

Practising our piety before others, does not seem to be a problem in post-Christian Canada. We may have been co-opted into the background by our embarrassment over Christian imperialism in the present multi-faith culture, or by how Christianity has become a caricature in our society courtesy of the religious right, or by how religion in general has become a dirty word because of the myriad of abuses of power, not only in the Christian community but also in the interfaith community. Whatever the reason, my take on mainstream present-day believers is that we would prefer to be invisible, and we may even point to this teaching of Jesus in tonight's gospel to justify our invisibility. Interestingly, Jesus does not discourage piety (or more accurately "righteousness"), a better translation of the Greek original of today's passage. He only discourages our abusing righteousness to appeal to our vanity. Righteousness stands!

By the same token, Jesus does not discourage charity. It is a safe guess that in Jesus' day, charity was not as broad a brush stroke as it is in present-day Canada in which we have hundreds, perhaps thousands of worthy causes, all of them competing for charitable status in order to attract a large donor base. The charity Jesus describes is much closer to the ground. Charity, he teaches, is to benefit the receivers, not the givers; and the charitable gesture itself places the donor in solidarity with those in need. Donors become poor, in a sense, so that another may be less poor and have adequate food, clothing, and shelter. This fragile and gracious relationship is disturbed if our giving is tainted by a reward of some kind.

Similar to practising our piety, I expect fasting is something whose value is not commended in 21<sup>st</sup> century Canada. But Christians might be able to approximate a life apart by taking on a spiritual discipline such as fasting. Let's say, for the sake of argument, we gave up eating meat for the 40 days of Lent. If we did so, our fast would, in all likelihood, accomplish the intent of fasting which is to set a marker in our daily routine that would remind us of God's claim on our lives and our response of discipleship. At least in Lutheran circles, there is no intrinsic spiritual value to abstaining from eating meat, but holding to the discipline such a decision would require of most of us would remind us of some of the things we might not otherwise appropriate that do have intrinsic spiritual value: prayer and meditation, for instance, that would lead us to action on behalf of another. One of secrets of prayer and reflection is that they lead to action. They change us. They change us because God's Spirit prays in us, Henri Nouwen says, as we pray for ourselves and others.

Finally, looking for our security in money, wealth, and material goods may seem foolish to everyone in these days when the stock market is depressed and the world economy is teetering. But I must admit, I haven't noticed any lack of interest in such things, despite the risks involved. If anything, the so-called Developed World has increased its focus on money as a means of survival. Dragons' Den's Kevin O'Leary still preaches the gospel of "the one who dies with the most toys wins," and he is annoyingly persuasive. Greed is good, he tells us, and he's a good salesman because, among other things, he himself lives the dream.

But his dream is not Jesus' dream. Jesus might acknowledge that using our gifts, talents, and opportunities to accomplish a goal redounds to the glory of our Creator, but not at the expense of the other gifts we have to use. Later, Saint Paul will remind Jesus' disciples that our quality of life without pant-loads of money can still be a life filled with love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control – the fruits of the Spirit given without cost to the whole people of God, not just the wealthy. Jesus teaches his disciples "where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." He looks at human nature and how easily it becomes enamoured of things whose value is ambiguous at best, and counsels his followers to a life apart, a life whose wellbeing is nothing but enriched by the fruits of the Spirit. And such a life is not a life determined by survival and peopled by winners and losers, rich people and poor people. The Christian life is relational. It is a life enriched by others, not prevented by or provided by others.

Through all of these examples, Jesus teaches his disciples about God, the object of our devotion, the worthy substitute for human vanity. And as we begin this *season apart* as nurture for our *life apart*, we remember that he has told us of a God who meets us in the quiet places of the heart; a God who works invisibly in people's lives; a God who does not measure us according to our wealth, power, influence, popularity, accomplishments, education, celebrity, or prestige. Rather, Jesus acquaints us with a God who measures us by how love for our neighbour and our love for justice determines what we do with the gift that is our life.

Remember that you are dust, God's dust. Amen.