

I wish you peace and all God's blessings. In today's Mass we hear the same Gospel that is read every Ash Wednesday. Jesus warns his disciples to be careful of making a display of their piety, especially when giving alms, praying and fasting. These are his words:

*"Beware of practicing your piety before men in order to be seen by them; for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven" (Matt 6:1ff)*

When giving alms we are told "sound no trumpet before you". When we pray we should go into our room and shut the door, and not be like the hypocrites who love to stand and pray in the synagogues and on street corners. Similarly, when we fast we should not look dismal so that people can see we are fasting, but to do our fasting in secret.

Let us pray:

Heavenly Father, your Son Jesus has called us to sincerely love and serve you, in humility and simplicity. Strengthen us Lord, that we will guard ourselves from the temptations to try and impress others with our piety. May we always be motivated by the desire to do your will and what is pleasing to you. Purify us, Father, that we may overcome any duality or duplicity in our lives as we aspire to be more and more like your Son. Help us never to think ourselves better than others or to fall into the trap of religious arrogance. We make this prayer through Our Lord Jesus Christ your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever, amen.

To some extent, all people manage the image they present to others. After all, if you go for a job interview you will try to present yourself well and talk about your strong points. A young person meeting someone they are attracted to will try and put themselves in a good light. It is part of human nature and, generally, we know that we need time to get to know people properly.

It is different, though, when such image management is deliberately misleading with the intention to deceive or manipulate. It is different when good actions are done, not for the sake of really wanting to do good, but only because it will make one look good – just as Jesus pointed out regarding almsgiving, prayer and fasting. If it is only to impress others and does not come from the heart, it is not authentic and loses all its value. Such image management can become a way of life and is ultimately living a dual life – what you see is not what you get!

Jesus too, in his humanity, presented an image to others, and it is the image of Truth. St Paul wrote of this in his letter to the Colossians: *He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation (1:15)*. This is not new to us, we know that Jesus is the revelation of God and shows us

who God is (and not just *about* God). And what does he reveal? In his birth he came with the simplicity, innocence and purity of a new born child. His birth was humble with no demonstration of power, might or domination. He made himself vulnerable by placing his life in the hands of human beings, entrusting himself to the stewardship of Mary and Joseph. His public ministry was filled with teaching the truth, showing compassion to those who suffered physically, mentally or through poverty. He was always conscious of the “little person”, such as the widow who made her small monetary contribution but in fact, gave all she had. He showed love and concern for those despised and rejected by others. Without condoning sin, he never rejected the person who sinned – not even those who were arrogant or hypocritical although he did not mince his words trying to get through to them. The most dramatic revelation of God was Jesus’ total self-giving on the Cross as he abandoned everything out of love. He was stripped of all dignity, deserted by most of his trusted companions, alone to the extent he cried out *My God, my God, why have you forsaken me*. But this was followed by his words of faith: “*Father, into your hands I commend my spirit*”, knowing that God was still present. When everything is taken from us – our youth, our health, our wealth, our families and friends – when all is stripped away from us will still have within us the three things that last: faith, hope and love (1Cor 13:13)?

We are made in the image of God (cf Gen 1:26). That image has been distorted by sin, and yet it still exists within us. As we reflect on how Jesus was the image of God, as his followers we must question how we are the image of God and what we must do to allow God’s image to shine within us. Simplicity, humility, vulnerability in our trust of God, truth, compassion, forgiveness, respect of the dignity of those rejected and considered unimportant, self abandonment to God - these are all key values. These are the values that are expressed in Jesus’ victory over death. They are the values of the new life of resurrection to which we are called to witness and to image to others. Just as Jesus gave all to God, so we say to God: I am totally yours!

Let us now pray for God’s blessing.

The Lord be with you

R/ And with your Spirit

May the merciful God lead you in all your ways that you walk in the footsteps of Our Lord Jesus Christ, trusting him never to desert you. May he open your hearts and minds that you may always be his image in the world, to give light and courage to those in doubt and despair. May he increase your faith, hope and love, that you may make yourself totally his. We ask this through Christ our Lord, amen.

May Almighty God bless you and protect you, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, amen