

St Mary-le-Bow, Cheapside, London EC2V 6AU
High Mass with imposition of ashes on Ash Wednesday
Dan Warnke, Parish Ordinand
Wednesday 14th February 2018 at 1.05pm

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

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

A couple of weeks ago a young woman was travelling on a train to Leeds, and talking on the phone to her mum. She was distressed, crying, worried about money, worried about how she would make ends meet. Now, I'm sure you've been there – I've been there – we've all overheard an intriguing conversation that leaves us wondering: what's going on? You can't help yourself but tune in.

It seems over the passed 18 months, this young woman had lost her grandparents, and she'd lost her father – the pressure of life had simply got to her – and now, weighed down by debt it was all too much. So, she talked a little longer, hung up, and closed her weary eyes.

Now it turns out, that someone did actually overhear the conversation, and whilst she slept left £100 under a napkin on her lap. When she woke, she cried again, not because of distress, but joy – joy that someone would show kindness to her. Not knowing what to do, she did what many people have become accustomed to; she took to Facebook. As these things tend to go, it went viral; shared more than 27,000 times, and was even picked up by the BBC.¹ But why? Why this need to find them? Why does it even matter? Why not simply accept the gift and be done?

Perhaps it's hard to feel vulnerable; perhaps it's hard to feel like you owe someone. Perhaps it's because the mystery is too much, or maybe it's because our world loves a hero, and she needed to find hers.

Today we gather on Ash Wednesday to mark the beginning of this season called Lent. But Lent is no time for heroes. Lent is a time when Christians fast, pray, and support others. It's a season of penitence, a time to give up something in discovering who we really serve (or are a slave to), and who we really care about. But these things are not goals, they are not virtuous acts that make us better people. What really matters is how we go about them.

¹ 'Train passenger wakes to find £100 gift from stranger', <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-leeds-42862106>, [accessed 31/01/2018].

And what we learn in our Gospel reading today is that the point is not to be seen. They are done 'in secret'. It seems that the way to do these things, is to become forgetful: the left hand not knowing what the right is doing. This is why the theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer says that 'the genuine deed of love is always a deed hidden to myself'.² But being hidden to myself is hard; being hidden to myself means not seeking attention, or looking for a reward. Alongside prayer and fasting, Lent is a time when we practice giving ourselves in such a way that it becomes 'second nature'. Publicity has no place in deeds 'hidden to myself'.

So what about this £100? What if this generous stranger knows this, what if it was a 'genuine deed of love'? What if they'd heard these words of Jesus and took them to heart? Perhaps in hearing the young woman's distress about money, the anonymous giver simply reached into their pocket and pulled out what they had, without much thought. What if this overwhelming self-forgetfulness – this not letting one hand know what the other is doing – came from an awareness of what they've received themselves? This kind of giving is not then something to be liked on Facebook, or open to public praise, but is seen by God alone, 'in secret'. And, according to Jesus, that is its own reward.

So whether we're giving, praying, or fasting during Lent, these things are not about becoming a 'good person'. There are no heroes in Lent. We don't give to be praised, we don't pray so people think we're holy, and we certainly don't fast to get something in return (or loose weight). Yet in a world where we like to be acknowledged, recognised, or at least appreciated in some way, the temptation we face is finding our value in the thanks of others. The Eucharistic gift is in the life of Jesus freely given, and freely received. So, as we enter this Lenten season, may we become evermore forgetful, hidden to ourselves, not letting our left hand know what the right is doing 'so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.'

Amen.

² Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, trans. Reinhard Krauss Barbara Green (Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, 4; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003) 385 at 152.