

Our readings today are deeply concerned with integrity. That is, consistency between what we believe and what we do, between what we show on the outside and what is in our hearts.

Isaiah challenges the people not to bow their heads and wear sackcloth, while all the time oppressing the poor. The prophet claims that all the piety in the world has no value if it's not matched with justice. In a very telling verse, he says "Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight." Their ritual has done nothing to touch the inner violence that lies ready to break forth at any moment. Religious actions have not led to transformation of character, nor a better world for those who suffer.

The Apostle Paul explains how integrity means fully accepting the gospel life – not just grasping after the good bits, but willingly embracing the hard parts. Even when he is seen as dishonoured, his grounded inner life allows him to rejoice and continue in truth. Others may see him as a disgrace, but his integrity remains intact because of the grace of God.

In the gospel, Jesus warns his hearers not to perform religious actions as a show, or to earn praise. He knows that what passes for spirituality can be a strategy to get others to admire and approve of us. When we pray, fast or give to look holy, then there is no spiritual merit in it. We might get the reward we were secretly seeking – the good opinion of others – but the true benefit of prayer, which is the deepening of our relationship with God, is lost. We sacrifice integrity for the sake of giving a good impression.

As we can see from these readings, living with integrity has always been a challenge for humanity. But it's something that matters very much to God. Matching up what we show to others and who we are in private, is a life-long journey of becoming the self that God knows us to be.

Our current world makes that even harder. Some of us perform a lot of our lives online now, and we can create any impression we want by curating our profiles, uploading pictures of the best bits of our lives and sharing our carefully selected opinions. We often manage multiple identities at once. Even in face to face situations, it's possible to conceal our private reality, or to project an image or mask.

But the greatest challenge to integrity doesn't come from our *deliberate* attempts to hide our private reality and pretend to be something we're not. Because we can confess those and seek to mend our ways. The greatest challenge is that *we don't know what we don't know* about what's going on under the surface of our conscious minds.

Our reading from Isaiah acknowledged that the people were genuine seekers after God. They delighted in drawing near to God. They sought out the prophet to learn from God. They would have been shocked by Isaiah's words. They simply couldn't see it. Perhaps their ignorance was wilful, but it appears it went quite deep.

We are all masters at ignoring, and then justifying, what's really going on.

Thomas Keating, one of the great teachers of prayer in recent times, talks about the false-self system made up of the need we all have for power and control, for affection and esteem, and for safety and security. These needs are beneath our everyday awareness. We can't see how we're acted on by them. But meeting these needs drives our behaviour far more strongly than our conscious values and commitments. This is at the heart of our lack of integrity.

The false-self system isn't bad. It's just how we've compensated for various 'lacks' in our life. We seek to fill up the needs for control, affection and security in places and ways that don't satisfy. Instead of seeking to meet our needs in God, and in genuine human community, we try a whole range of worldly strategies. Which returns us to Jesus' words about not storing up treasure for ourselves on earth.

The false-self system explains how I, despite a deep commitment to non-violence in word and action, can become a screaming harpy to my kids when their mess undermines my need to control my environment. It explains how we end up in the grip of addictions, why we work too many hours, why we own multiple properties while stepping over the homeless person on the street, why we find ourselves having an affair despite wanting to be faithful, why we're evasive with our best friend because we don't want them to disapprove of a decision we've made.

When we come to confession, we can usually find a few symptoms of the false self. I lied. I hurt someone with harsh words. I avoided someone. But the much deeper work is to stop rationalising our false-self inspired actions to ourselves, and to let God reveal the unconscious drivers behind them. That's why Jesus often used the metaphor of blindness. We are all blind to what is really in our hearts, and most of us don't want, or don't know how, to do the work of learning to see. It's why we ask God's Spirit to search our hearts, rather than relying on our own ability to see ourselves clearly.

The season of Lent brings the deep wisdom of the church to bear on our integrity problem. The traditional 'tasks' of Lent are circuit breakers. Over centuries, we have learned that prayer, fasting and giving to others, if done with wisdom, help us to become truly ourselves before God. They stick a big spoke in the wheel of the false-self system.

The kind of prayer that Jesus means when he talks of 'going into your room' is the prayer of the heart – the hidden inner self. It's not prayer that's full of words and thoughts – our words and thoughts mostly just repeat the stuck record of our false-self. Genuine honesty in prayer involves being quiet before God, open, not full of our own agenda, but simply inviting the Spirit to renew our hearts.

Fasting creates a space between the clamour of our appetites - our unexamined wants - on the one hand and what we genuinely need on the other. By denying ourselves something as basic as food, we make room for the question 'how much of my life is taken up with feeding my impulses, rather than my true convictions?'

And when we give, not out of our surplus, but so generously that it makes us a little anxious, we challenge our fears of not having enough, our tendency always to want more, and our compulsion to soothe ourselves with 'stuff'.

These are the traditional disciplines of Lent, but there are other things that we can practice that disrupt our usual patterns. The point is to go against the grain of the compulsions that bury our truth and make us pretend in front of other people. There's nothing pleasant about any of this. Having an open heart before God and getting a glimpse of what's *really* motivating us brings us into painful contact with our own sin, and the places where we are wounded. It's not pretty. But it is real, and it will lead to the integrity that God desires. As we learn 'truth in our inner being', we expose ourselves to more and more of God's grace and healing. We become free. Thanks be to God.