

Hinde Street Methodist Church

7pm March 6th 2019 – Ash Wednesday

Revd Val Reid

Matthew 6: 1-6, 16-21

Psychotherapists have a saying:

The bigger the front, the bigger the back.

I think what they mean is that we should be alert.

When someone is particularly vehement about a particular topic,

When they are especially judgemental about sex, say, or expenses,

Then you might want to wake up your inner cynic.

What have they got to hide?

Or, perhaps, not so much what are they deliberately hiding,

but what have they got buried deep in their sub-conscious,

that they don't want to look at honestly and openly?

Carl Jung called it our shadow.

Everyone carries a shadow,

and the less it is embodied in the individual's conscious life,

the blacker and denser it is.

This is our dark side, the difficult stuff about ourselves that we would really rather not know.

And the trouble is, we tend to project this buried shadow onto other people.

Because we can't recognise this shameful behaviour in ourselves, we criticise others.

As loudly and as publicly as possible.

Take Cardinal Pell.

He became a bit of a celebrity in the global Catholic Church by preaching about the importance of traditional morality.

Universal innocence was a 'dangerous myth', he claimed.

Original sin was 'alive and flourishing'.

IVF for single mothers – *we are on the verge of creating a whole new generation of stolen children.*

When a wreath was laid outside St Patrick's Cathedral in Melbourne in memory of gay students in Catholic schools who had taken their own lives, Cardinal Pell had this to say:

I haven't got good reasons for those suicides.

If they are connected with homosexuality, it is another reason to be discouraging people going in that direction.

Homosexual activity is a much greater health hazard than smoking.

The church, he said, was *frightened to put forward the hard teachings of Christ.*

Cardinal Pell gave evidence to Australia's Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, which reported in December 2017.

The Catholic Church came out of the enquiry covered in shame.

Abusers had been protected, the Commission found.

Abuse had been swept under the carpet.

On December 11th last year, he was found guilty on five counts of sexual abuse of minors.

The verdict was subject to a suppression order, and could not be reported until this last week.

As Pope Francis said:

Behind rigidity something always lies hidden.

In many cases, a double life.

Today is Ash Wednesday, the start of Lent.

What has Ash Wednesday got to do with the trial of Cardinal Pell?

Well, Lent – and especially Ash Wednesday – is traditionally a time when we focus on our sins.

And I think that some of our traditional Ash Wednesday readings might help us with reflecting on this morality tale for our times.

In this evening's gospel reading, Matthew is critical, as he so often is, of hypocrisy.

Whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you in the synagogues and in the streets...

Do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing...

But it's not that simple.

In the previous chapter Matthew has Jesus tell his disciples:

Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.

So which is it to be?

Secret charity?

Or a good example to others?

I wonder perhaps whether Matthew is asking us to do something rather different.

When 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.

I wonder whether, two millennia before Jung, Matthew is inviting us to open up to our shadow side.
To have the courage to go into that inner room – our hidden sub-conscious self – and take a good, long, hard look at what is buried there.
To bring it into the light of God's loving gaze.
And thereby to rob it of its power over us.

I wonder whether this is what Jesus is doing, in his forty days in the wilderness.
Taking a good, long, hard look at the temptations of power.
The kind of Messiah he could be, if he allowed himself to let rip.
The kind of populist, crowd-pleasing, show-off miracle worker who would certainly get the public vote.
But if Jesus teaches us anything through his life and ministry, it is that we have nothing to fear in opening ourselves up to the God who sees us, and knows us, and still loves us.
No need to be defensive.
No need to hide.
No need to pretend.
Go into that inner room with God, and call out the murky stuff you'll find there.

If I were on my own with all that dark matter, I'd be overwhelmed.
But I'm not.
I am with God.
And God is big enough and kind enough to hold it all safely while I get to know the hidden parts of my soul.
And allow God to redeem them.
To redeem me.

So perhaps this might be part of our Lent experience.
And perhaps it might help us make sense of what is going on in our world.
And in our church.
And in our selves.
Not in a way that simply offers us a more informed technique for judgementalism.
But in a way that opens up ourselves and our communities to the grace of God.

We are now in the first week of March.
It's Brexit month.
Who knows what will happen in Parliament, in our country, in Europe, over the next three weeks!
But listen to what is being said.
Listen to the voices of those you agree with.
And those you disagree with.
Those who make you feel good.
And those who rub you up the wrong way.

And ask yourself – what's going on beneath the surface?
What shadow side are they projecting in their apparent certainties?
And what shadow side are we protecting in our comfortable alliances?

What might God be asking of us, as people who can't help but be connected to others in our country – and in Europe – and across the globe?

How should we vote – if we get a chance to vote?

How should we talk about the political views of others in our family, our street, our church?

How should we talk to others with whom we disagree?

Do we ever do that?

Or do we avoid the other side?

What's in our inner room, that we can't risk those conversations?

At our General Church meeting, at the end of this month, we will be talking about the future pattern of worship at Hinde Street.

It's bound to be different.

Can we be honest about what matters to us?

And why?

And can we listen to what matters to others here?

Even if it's very different from our own hopes and needs?

What's going on in our own inner room?

Why do some of these things have such a powerful hold on us?

Is it about God?

Or about some hidden part of ourselves that we can't quite bear to disturb?

We'll also be talking about money.

About congregational giving.

About the black hole in our finances.

And the shortfall in our budget.

Again.

That big campaign last year to encourage church members to review their giving – it made virtually no difference to the church's income from the congregation.

We're always very nervous about having these conversations.

Why?

What's stirring there in our shadow side?

Why does money provoke such powerful feelings in us?

What does it represent?

Are we tempted to blame others for not giving enough?

What are we defending ourselves against?

These questions are not about judgement.

At least – not the sort of judgement that shames us, and guilt-trips us into doing better.

They are about the wideness of God's mercy.

And the kindness of God's judgement.

Which enables us to be honest.

To look with open minds and hearts at why we do what we do, and say what we say.

The ministry of Jesus was about befriending.

Befriending the people who lived on the edge,

The people that other people didn't like

The people that were the scapegoats for a frightened and downtrodden community.

So we are invited to befriend the parts of ourselves that we don't much like.

Perhaps even to bless our shadow side.

Because Jesus came to bring us truth.

And the truth will set us free.

And allowing God to show us the truth about ourselves, is the first step to allowing God to change us.

As individuals.

As a church.

As a country.

Perhaps in a Damascus Road flash of light.

Perhaps little by little, day by day.

But to allow ourselves to live not out of the safe self we have constructed up above the surface.

But out of our whole selves, our best selves, the selves we were created to be.

Don't forget that Jesus was led into the wilderness by the spirit.

And angels came and waited on him.

He was not alone with his shadow side.

He was with God.

And so are we.

Amen.