

TFTD L17 Left hand or right?

Tuesday 29 March 2022



Many thanks to John Murray for today's THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

HOLY HABITS: SERVICE

Matthew 6.1-4

‘Beware of practising your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven. So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.’

Anyone who was brought up on the communion service from the Book of Common Prayer will be familiar with the following sentence of scripture, read at the offertory:

Let your light so shine before men that, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven.

My wife says this is her least favourite line in the liturgy, and that is precisely because – although it also comes from the Sermon on the Mount, not long before the text we have been asked to think about today - it seems to contradict it. It is read at the time when traditionally an offering was made for

the poor. So in chapter 5 Jesus tells us to shine like lights so that people can see our good works; and then in chapter 6 we find him telling us that when we give to the poor we should not draw attention to ourselves but instead do it more or less in secret.

I suppose we can get out of the contradiction by saying that in chapter 5 Jesus is talking about Christian witness (we should be “salt” and “light” in the world); and in chapter 6 he’s making a quite different point: that we shouldn’t be making a song and dance about our good works. But be that as it may, you can still say that the Prayer Book chose a pretty inappropriate text to be read at the time of the offertory.

So the right way to give to the poor is this: when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing. But what does that mean exactly?

Well, I think it’s a bit like the arguments which go round in your head when you’re faced with someone in the street who’s begging for a bit of money. It seems to me that the left hand is saying things like “they’ll only spend it on drink or drugs” or “they’re really part of an organised racket”. While the right hand is saying: “oh, never mind: just do it.” Sometimes you just have to ignore your left hand and let your right hand win.

Or, as our society faces up to increasingly shocking poverty, the left hand will say things like “it’s no good letting people become dependent on welfare” or “we can’t go on just throwing money at problems”. Arguments which are not to be dismissed out of hand but, here again, there are times when we just have to let our right hand have its way and go ahead and do something so that people can survive.

John Murray