

FASTING

Mt 6:16-18

In times past the Church has put extra emphasis during Lent on three disciplines – prayer, fasting and giving. We already looked at prayer and today we look at the subject of fasting. As it happens, it is very appropriate for these strange days in which we are living. I saw a quote on social media this week where someone said, ‘I would never have thought I would be giving up this much for Lent.’

In the modern world, about the only time one hears the words food and fast in the same sentence is ‘fast foods.’ That not what we are talking about today. When one talks about fasting, a common reaction is, ‘Hang on, we are no longer in the Middle Ages.’ There is a widespread notion that fasting is outdated and irrelevant, and if it is practised, it is done so only by super spiritual Christians.

I remember back in the 70’s there was a Catholic priest in South Africa, who was on a hunger strike because of his opposition to Apartheid. My grandmother referred to him quite sincerely as the ‘dieting priest’. But fasting is not about hunger strikes or dieting.

Fasting can be defined as ‘abstaining from food for spiritual purposes.’ Hunger strikes are for political purposes; diets are for physical purposes; fasting is for spiritual purposes. Normally, fasting implies going without any food. But one can also have a partial fast, where only certain foodstuffs are excluded. For example, in the OT we see Daniel doing this when for three weeks he abstained from meat, wine and delicacies – he had only vegetables and water. That’s a bit like the type of fast that some people do for Lent, where one excludes only certain items from one’s diet.

So, is there a place for fasting today for ordinary Christ followers? The Bible certainly suggests so. We heard earlier the words of Jesus, ‘When you fast...’ Not ‘if you fast, but when you fast...’ John Wesley had this to say about it, ‘Some people have exalted fasting beyond all Scripture and reason, while others have utterly disregarded it.’ But having said that, we must not make it into a legalistic commandment. And those who practise it should not try to impose it on others.

Let's have a look at the purpose of fasting. We have said it is for spiritual purposes, but we need to spell that out a bit.

Perhaps we can say first what the purpose is not. It is not to show what a good Christian I am. Also, it not a way of trying to twist God's arm to get something from Him. That is a subtle but very real temptation – the idea of saying 'Lord look what I'm doing for you; won't you do this or that thing for me in return.'

The real purpose of fasting, as with other disciplines like prayer and Bible study, is simply to be able us to focus our lives more deeply on God. It is a way of reminding ourselves that we are first and foremost spiritual beings, and fasting is a way of keeping that priority in our lives. To quote John Wesley again, 'First, let fasting be done to the Lord, with our eye fixed on him. Let our intention be this and this alone, to glorify our Father in heaven.'

The missionary and writer, Andrew Murray, said this, 'Prayer is the hand with which we grasp the invisible; fasting is the other hand with which we let go of the visible.' Food can take too big a part in our lives and fasting is a way to keep God as our priority. By all means let's enjoy our food as the good gift from God that it is, but let's sometimes do without, to remind our stomachs that they are not the boss. And let's use such times to remember those for whom going without food is not a choice, but a daily reality.

What we've said about food is equally true about other things that can become too important in our lives – whether it's sport or shopping; whether its our favourite computer game or Bingo. We could all do with having a fast from certain things in order to remind us of what is really important.

And this has been forced on us during these days, hasn't it? We are suddenly having to do without many things that have been so much part of our lives. In many ways that's going to be very difficult and challenging, but in one way at least it's something positive. We are being given the opportunity to see our lives with fresh eyes. Sometimes we don't realise the hold that certain things may have on us until they aren't there. It's an opportunity for us to realign our priorities and lifestyles.

William Wordsworth wrote, 'The world is too much with us; late and soon, getting and spending we lay waste our powers...' These days are a rare

opportunity for us to see whether we are laying waste our powers; our resources – time, money, energy, talents.

The other side of it is that when once again we can do the things that we have been denied, either by choice or through force of circumstance, we can enjoy them with a new sense of gratitude and appreciation. I end with this piece that has been going around on the internet by someone named Laura Kelly Fanucci:

‘When this is over, may we never again take for granted a handshake with a stranger; full shelves at the store; conversations with neighbours; a crowded theatre; Friday night out; the taste of communion; a routine check-up; the school run; coffee with a friend; the stadium roaring, each deep breath, life itself.

‘When this ends, may we find we have become more like the people we wanted to be, we were called to be, we hoped to be. And may we stay that way – better for each other because of the worst.’