

Fasting in a Fast-Paced World

by Art Zannon

OLPH Theme: "This Is Love"

Often our lives seem to move at break neck speed, laced with stress and governed by calendars and schedules with barely a spare moment. With the arrival of Lent, Catholics are challenged to look at this way of living by fasting from moving at the speed of humankind and embracing moving at the speed of God.

Fasting (as opposed to dieting) confronts our culture. Fasting, in a society that has plenty and is motivated by immediate self-gratification, is generally not perceived as a value. Yet, for Jews, Christians, and Muslims, fasting is part and parcel of practicing one's faith in today's culture.

Biblical Roots of Fasting

The Bible provides a treasure-trove of reflections on the meaning of fasting. In both the Old and New Testaments fasting usually means total abstinence from food from morning until evening (see 2 Samuel 1:12; Jonah 3:7; Acts 9:9). This is still the case for Muslims today during the month of Ramadan.

Fasting as Mourning

In both Old Testament times and Jesus' times, fasting could be done for a number of different reasons. One motive was as an act of mourning. For example, after the death of King Saul, David and his men "mourned and wept and fasted until evening for Saul and his son Jonathan" (2 Samuel 1:12). David likewise refused to eat after the death of his general Abner (2 Samuel 3:35), and after the death of his first child by Bathsheba (2 Samuel 12:18-21). Such fasting was an expression of grief and mourning.

Fasting as Sorrow for Sin

In the Bible, fasting is also understood as

an expression of sorrow for sin. Fasting was prescribed for this reason on the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur). In later Jewish tradition, and among observant Jews today, this fast was interpreted to mean complete abstinence from food on the Day of Atonement, not merely smaller meals or no eating between meals.

Fasting as Prayer

According to the Bible, fasting could also be done in conjunction with prayers of petition. David fasted while his child by Bathsheba lay mortally ill, in the hope that God would spare his child's life (2 Samuel 12:15-17, 22). David's fast was a prayer for God's intervention.

Like any act of religious piety, fasting could be done mechanically. Joel called for a fast that was an expression of true repentance, of truly turning to God: "Rend your hearts, not your garments, and return to the Lord, your God. For gra-

cious and merciful is he; perhaps he will again relent and leave behind a blessing" (Joel 2:13-14). Joel's message is that external expressions of mourning are not enough; it needs to be internalized in our hearts.

Fasting as Justice

One of the best biblical descriptions of the meaning of fasting is provided by the prophet Isaiah. Speaking through the prophet, God says: "Is not this the fast that I choose: to lose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin?" (Isaiah 58:6-7)

In this passage God does not speak of helping the poor in general but specifi-



cally helping the oppressed: those who are poor, not because of misfortune but because they are the victims of injustice. This teaching about fasting is a call to eliminate the injustice that causes their hunger, rather than simply feed them. God demands not merely mercy, but a rooting out of injustice and a repairing of its effects. There is quite a difference between our being charitable to others and our making reparation for the harm we have done to them.

Whose sins of injustice lie behind the suffering of the oppressed? It may be our personal, individual sins, or it may be the sins of the society of which we are a part. The relevant point is that we are to root out these sins and to repair the damage that our individual and collective sins have wrought.

Isaiah's prophecy provides food for meditation during Lent. When we are considering what special practices or penance we will undertake, do we think mainly in terms of ourselves? "I'll give up TV, spending too much time online, alcoholic beverages or chocolates." Or do we think of the needs of others: "I'll give up some of my free time to help the

single parent to care for his or her children, volunteer at a nursing home, tutor a child. I'll go through my clothing and see what I could donate to a thrift shop. I'll go without pay for a day and take time off from my regular job to volunteer at a local food bank or to take an elderly person to the doctor.

Jesus and Fasting

According to the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus fasted forty days and forty nights (Matthew 4:1). The Gospel of Luke states that he ate nothing, implying that Jesus abstained from food (Luke 4:2). Subsequently Jesus was tempted by the devil, but the cleansing that happened as a result of his fasting empowered him to stand up to the devil's threefold temptation.

Jesus, himself a prophet who followed in the footsteps of the prophet Isaiah, challenged his disciples in the Sermon on the Mount to be joy-filled when fasting (Matthew 6:16-18). Fasting is not a time for show and tell, but rather a time to ponder what works of remedial justice and healing mercy we could undertake as our fast: undoing any wrongs we have committed.

Fasting may be from making abusive use of our tongues through put-downs and other forms of verbal abuse. Or fasting may be from failing to use our voice to speak out about injustices in our society. Or it may be speaking up by contacting our legislator, requesting that he or she provide legislation for more affordable housing for the poor.

Both Isaiah and Jesus teach us that the best way to mourn for our sins is to undo their harmful effects. That is what Lent is all about. Jesus reminds us that our fasting is not to be seen by others, but by God (Matthew 6:18). What type of fasting will God see us practice this Lent?

Reflection Questions

- What is the type of fasting God wishes of me?
- What is the penance God asks of me?
- What is God nudging me to do this Lent?"

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