

Sermon Lent 2 Year C 2022

As Christians, we do not get very far in the spiritual life if we do not accept some level of discipline. This season of Lent brings this home very close to us. But as we saw last week in Christ's own temptations in the wilderness, his fasting, prayer, and knowledge of scripture shows us that we do not have to settle for our base instincts. We can hope for something more. After the pattern and example of our Lord, Christian discipline is in fact *a tool*, a means of *liberating* ourselves, so we can more fully live our Christian vocation. Christian discipline is a tool so that we can better bear the likeness of Christ. Christian discipline enables us to grow in virtue and put away vice precisely for this: to become more Christlike! Our bodies have a glorious destiny – a transfigured destiny! Godly discipline allows that destiny to shine out.

The idea that discipline *liberates* us scandalises many people. It seems paradoxical. Surely freedom - liberty – is doing what like, when you like - no one telling you what to do, or how to do it. But doing what you like, when you like, how you like of course is *not* freedom. This is not liberty. It is self indulgence. It is pandering to the illusions of our own grandeur. It is making a god of yourself, indeed a slave to yourself. Discipline, in the Christian vision of things, frees us from ourselves, our indifference, our contentment to simply drift, unexamined though life. Discipline shows up how ready we are to indulge ourselves - physically, materially, spiritually even. Christian discipline frees us from ourselves so God can have room to do God's work in us.

Saint Paul in his letter to the Philippians today has stern words for those who have allowed one aspect of their lives to ensnare them, those whose 'god is their belly.' This reference appears to be in relation to those who have developed a lax approach to moral law and decent behaviour in the mistaken idea that the body was an irrelevance once the mind had been enlightened and the soul redeemed. Paul in Romans is quite clear, you cannot use the law of grace as a ground for moral licence. Being saved does not give permission to do what you like! But old heresies die hard. Even if we do not give intellectual assent to this idea, we often *do* give it assent by our action. Ours is a morally lax generation, with even Christians not knowing what the limits are.

The Christian discipline of fasting, commended to us in this holy season of Lent, perhaps more than anything, shows up some the gaps in an integrated faith. More than anything it can show up some of the hard truths about ourselves. But good! Thank God for this yearly opportunity to take stock, to examine ourselves seriously, to have that nudge of conscience convicting us! Thank God we have this yearly reminder telling us, *'well maybe I am not so in control of my own life, my own habits, my daily life as I thought I was.'* Fasting helps because, by seeking to control - to discipline – our *bodily life*, we might have more control - more discipline - in our *spiritual life*.

Now, it's a most telling symptom that the practice of fasting is *so* neglected and *so* reduced in contemporary church life. But fasting has been part and parcel of the Christian tradition from the beginning, highlighting its importance in Christian faith. Scripture itself is replete with examples of people who fast for one reason or another. But Scripture also gives warnings about fasting for the wrong reasons or with the wrong attitude. Isaiah warns that when people do not live as God desires, they should be prepared for their fasting to accomplish nothing. And Matthew, as we heard in the gospel for Ash Wednesday, tells us fasting is not for appearances. But the same text from Matthew also states, *'when you fast.'* It is assumed it is a given. The gospel accounts of Jesus in the wilderness all note that this was a time of fasting of our Lord. So, those who wish to imitate Our Lord, to be more Christlike after the pattern of the gospels, and those who wish to take the biblical record seriously, really must come to grips with this idea of fasting.

Now fasting does not earn us special points with God. It is not some magical way into manipulating God into doing what we want. Neither is fasting a spiritual way to lose weight! If that is our motive, forget it! Essentially, fasting is meant to sharpen our senses for prayer, and our "appetite" for God. Importantly, it brings us face to face with *the hunger at the core of our being*. But fasting also exposes how we try to distract ourselves from our *core* hunger, our deepest hunger, by constantly devouring and consuming creature comforts. Through self-denial we can recognise what truly controls us and how little taste we have for sacrifice or nourishing our life with God.

Often I hear, ‘*But Father, fasting is so hard!*’ Well, precisely! Discipline is hard. And this should be *a lesson* to us! A lesson on how much we *are* addicted to feelings of physical satisfaction. A lesson on how much attention we give to the physical rather than the spiritual. But just because it is hard doesn’t mean it is impossible, and gives us even more reason to implore and trust the mercy and help of God. It is challenging but not impossible. So, start simple. And then build on the basics year by year. Start with a fast – no breakfast – on Sunday mornings. (Unless you are diabetic) there is no reason any of us cannot manage that. Let the Eucharist be the first food that touches your lips on Sundays! On the Lord’s Day let the Bread of Heaven be the first thing we taste. We can all start with that, and then continue *every* Sunday, so a *regular* habit of fasting is built into our lives.

Then, during the rest of Lent, give up snacking. Again, that is something we could all do, starting today. The western diet is built around never feeling hungry. None of us will die if our food is simply one main meal and two small meals, and let that be that! And then next, drop one of those meals. During Lent it could be every day we drop a whole meal, and certainly one day a week we could manage that. Fridays are most appropriate. None of this is impossible, and none – in some form - is beyond any of you. And in all this allow yourselves to be hungry. Notice those feelings of grumpiness and tiredness. Let *these* be a spiritual lesson to you. How come our emotions, our mood is so dependent on what I eat!? And let what we *do* take into our bodies be more intentional, rather than the mindless consumerism most of us engage in. And let this give way to gratitude, that the Lord, in his goodness, *does* provide for us.

Christians would do well to remember that few things will be more radical, will be more counter-cultural, than for us not to indulge every whim and fancy, for us to refrain from constant consuming and activity. Because it shows our allegiance *to something bigger*, that our belonging is to *something more* than what the world can give. In other words, our fasting *gives evangelical witness*.

So, to this end I really want to commend the discipline of fasting, yes to you all, but especially to the young people of our parish - to offer *leadership* on this front within our community - and especially the young men of our parish. Ours is an age given over to self-indulgence and pleasure. But here the church is offering you something noble, and virtuous and heroic.

So many people about us are hungry to give themselves totally to something. So many people are dissatisfied with the meagre and impoverished diet the world offers. So many people are yearning for something which speaks to the whole person; something which does not simply satisfy the body; and something which does not alienate the body from the soul; something which offers, life, wholeness, truth. Our practice of fasting – lived with boldness and generosity – can speak to all this! And all of us can make a start. All of us can incorporate some pattern of fasting into our own lives. The world doesn't need more weak, complacent, half-hearted believers! It needs believers who are committed to living the faith – including its disciplines - with vigour and generosity. Do so, and we can grow into the likeness and pattern of Christ himself. Amen.