

Fasting – Lent II, 2018 (Mk.8:31-end: self denial)

There are many splendid things about being married to me.

I give you, for instance, the rippling physique and well-toned six pack, barely concealed today by these robes.

Then there's my gentle, loving wisdom around the home: always full of grace and patience, sweet and reasonable at all times. Lisa and the boys bask in my healing presence.

And lastly, of course, there is the always available spiritual counsel. Words of wisdom about what God wants for you, pastoral guidance for every situation, on tap whenever you want.

Sometimes before you even *know* you want it. Many a time I have felt a nudge from the Lord to share with Lisa some wise word for her life, before she has thought to ask. I know she is just so grateful for this gift, so grateful she sometimes struggles to express it in words.

Only the other day, Lisa reminded me of a pearl of wisdom I shared some years ago. A stunningly original notion, which you'll never have come across before: the idea that Lent might not be about giving things up, but about taking things on. Lent might not be about giving things up, but taking them on.

The problem about being married to Lisa, you see, is that she does have rather a good memory. She does *remember* the things I say to her, and therefore I am forced to conclude that I did indeed say this. However, and I tell you this just to show how, in addition to all my other virtues, I am also very *humble*: this idea is just wrong. The idea that Lent is not about giving things up, but taking them on, is just wrong.

Not, of course, that taking on things is itself wrong. If your Lent involves more prayer, or more giving, more visiting the lonely, saying thank you, that is fantastic. So it should. All of those are great things, and something like them should be part of every Lent.

The problem comes when you put all the emphasis on that side, the doing things side, and forget the first one: the giving things up. Because giving things up, or fasting, is vital.

Just before I say why: a health warning. Whatever the reason for fasting is, it is not to make God love you, to impress Him, or to earn brownie points in Heaven. However important fasting is, it's not that important. It doesn't save you. You are loved by God already, whoever you are and whatever you do. And when we are welcomed into the joy and the beauty and the wonder of God's kingdom, it will not be because we have tried hard and done a good job. It will be because Jesus of Nazareth lived and died and rose again. It's because of him that love will win in us, and in the world. Not because of what we do - because of what He did. That, incidentally, is why lots and lots of Christians refuse to fast on a Sunday. Every Sunday is a feast of the resurrection; it is Victory Day. Fasting, I think, has no place on a Sunday – even in the heart of Lent. Something to debate afterwards perhaps. Anyway – if fasting is not about impressing God or earning brownie points or saving yourself, why do it? Why should Christians fast?

Several reasons. First, quite simply, Jesus told us to. And if Jesus is who the church says he is, then even if we don't quite understand *why* he told us to do something, it's a good idea to do it. And it's right there in today's Gospel: 'if you want to be my follower, *deny yourself*, take up your cross and follow me.' *Deny yourself*. That's the essence of fasting – whether we're talking about food, or alcohol, or luxuries, or sex, or whatever: identify something the self longs for, and say 'no'.

And as you do what Jesus says, just because he says it, gradually you begin to see why it makes sense. So, for instance, you see that it's a kind of training. Really being a disciple is

going to involve all kinds of difficult things: it's going to involve giving lot more time, money and love to other people, other *strange* people than we normally would. It is almost certainly going to involve being unfashionable in all sorts of ways, and sometimes much more than that. It might mean facing hostility, and persecution, and for many Christians it means death. *Take up your cross and follow me*, he says. It's a tall order, and most of us are not ready for it. So like in all things, start small, start basic. Learn to say 'no' to yourself on chocolate, on wine, on cake, whatever it might be. Build up your power *not* to be driven by your desires, by your urges. Don't despise the time of small things: the day might come when it will have trained you for something much bigger.

So fast because it trains you; fast also because it teaches you empathy. We don't enjoy hunger, and so whenever we are remotely hungry, usually we fix it very quickly: we just eat. But most hungry people, some living very nearby, can't do that. The food, the drink, the money just isn't there. Most hungry people are not hungry by choice. And it does those of us who are normally quite full to realise just a tiny bit, just a glimmer, of what it feels like to have an empty stomach. Fasting is not the same, of course, not the same at all as poverty. But it can teach just a little bit of empathy, and maybe make us more determined to see that no-one has to feel this way. At the very, very simplest level perhaps the resources we don't use when we're fasting, the food and the money, can go straight to someone else. Fasting and giving tend to go together, but more of that another time.

And lastly, fast because it teaches you gratitude: because when you don't have a glass of wine all week, or a piece of cake, or gosh - food at all for a while – then when you do, you realise quite how delicious it is. You really, really enjoy it. It tastes amazing, however simple it is, and it feels wonderful inside. And you are happy, and grateful. And gratefulness is one of the very, very best soil for all spiritual growth. Someone who is regularly reminded of how good it is to have hunger met, to really taste and savour things – well, that person is well placed to grow.

So fasting trains you for the big challenges of discipleship; it teaches you empathy the poor and hungry; it frees up resources to help them; it teaches you gratitude. *It even*, if you still need a clincher, helps you lose weight. It's good for you: spirit and body go together. All of which begs the question – why stop at Lent? If fasting is so good, why not make it just a regular, ordinary part of Christian existence which goes on all the time? Why not have a pattern, say, of a day or two fasting a week? Nothing spectacular, nothing showing off, nothing which makes Christianity more about our effort than Jesus' victory. But just a simple, regular pattern of self-denial, especially in that most basic area of food and drink, week by week.

And that, of course, is *just* what the Church has taught we should all be doing, has taught for many, many generations. One of the interesting things about our time is how it seems to many a novel, strange proposal, fit only perhaps for premier league disciples, the spiritual elite. Well, it's not. For most Christians, for most of history, regular fasting was just basic, ordinary discipleship. I suggest if you want to grow spiritually, think very seriously about making it part of yours. And if we're going to grow as a church, part of *ours*. Amen.