

Homily For Friday After Ash Wednesday - Year I St Peter's 8:30am Mass - Friday, February 24, 2023

Isaiah 58:1-9 "Day after day they seek me as if they were a nation that desires righteousness."

Psalms 51:1-17 "Against you, you alone have I sinned, and done what is evil in your sight."

Matthew 9:14-15 "The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away and then they will fast."

To Fast Or Not To Fast

Introduction

The three main keys to a successful Lent are always before us. There are different ways to say it but we know that we must first turn to God in prayer, with our whole hearts so that God may live in us. Second, we fast, denying ourselves some earthly pleasures so that our appetite may be for God. Third, we give to others so that we may participate in the justice God, and so that we will gain a glimpse of the blessings God wants to give to us.

Our readings, especially early in Lent, provide us with a kind of blueprint or roadmap for how to discover the depth of the mystery that is Easter. The promise is that the more we enter into this journey with our hearts, the more profound will be our experience of resurrected life, transformed from death and darkness. Each day has a focus. Today, it is obviously fasting, the second of the big three.

Fasting on Fridays is considered one of the signs of obedience to the Church. It caused great confusion when it seemed that this law had been somewhat relaxed. That discussion aside for the moment, fasting on the Fridays of Lent is an even greater requirement for those who are able.

Matthew

It is very interesting in today's Gospel passage that it is the disciples of John who ask why Jesus and his disciples don't fast. I imagine that this question coming from them doesn't have the same hostility behind it as when the Pharisees ask. So it is a great teaching moment for Jesus. The Lord asks them (paraphrasing): Do the

wedding guests fast as if they are in mourning? Of course not. But, "the days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast."

You know that Jesus uses symbols and metaphors to describe himself at times. He is like a gate or a door. He is a good shepherd. A mother hen. And there are others. But there are a few times when he is not using a metaphor: "This bread IS my body. This cup is my blood."

Jesus as the bridegroom is not a metaphor. This description of himself goes back to the very beginning of creation. From the beginning, there is a kind of intimacy that is only shared between a husband and wife. Adam and Eve were naked before God and before each other. It wasn't about sex like it is today. It was about a relationship of total openness and freedom. Their disobedience resulted in shame in their nakedness.

But Jesus comes to restore intimate relationship with God. When he is stripped naked on the cross, it is intended by the world as the ultimate shame. But Jesus transforms it into the ultimate renewal of the original intimacy. Jesus is not just any bridegroom. He is the one who does what no other human person can do.

With this, we can perhaps understand his answer to the question of fasting. I am the ultimate bridegroom. That is a time of celebration. When I am taken from you, then you can fast. This will give meaning and purpose to your fasting. We remember that Jesus was taken away as he predicted. And so we honour his sacrifice by our fasting, looking forward to the day when we will again celebrate.

Isaiah

God tells the people through the prophet Isaiah that it is not enough to physically fast. Your hearts must be turned towards God and reoriented and be merciful to the poor and afflicted. Otherwise, it is not following God's ways. They are practising a kind of useless fasting "As if they were a nation that obeys me and follows my ways." It's a bad joke what they are doing. Let your fasting turn your hearts to the works of justice. Be concerned for the hungry and the poor around you. In this way fasting and almsgiving are joined as one great act of prayer.

They could perhaps fool themselves but they could not fool God. Perhaps the greatest sin might have been to think so little of God that they could imagine fooling God. I think we are capable of convincing ourselves that the most ridiculous lies are really truths.

Psalm

Psalm 51 could sustain our entire Lenten observance. That's why it comes up regularly in the readings. David's great sin prompted this greatest of the penitential psalms. St. Augustine, as he was in his bed during his final illness, asked for this psalm to be posted on the wall opposite his bed so he could meditate on it day and night. That great saint knew his need for repentance. He said that during the first half of his life, his greatest temptations were the sins of the flesh. But during the second half of his life it was always the spiritual sins which plagued him, especially the sin of pride.

Call To Conversion

St. Peter Chrysologus says: "There are three things by which faith stands firm. They are prayer, fasting and almsgiving. If you have only one of them, you have nothing."

Pope Benedict XVI says: "The Sacred Scriptures and the entire Christian tradition teach that fasting is a great help to avoid sin and all that leads to it. True fasting, as the divine Master repeats, is rather to do the will of the Heavenly Father."

A young man proposed to his wife at the place of the crucifixion. He said, "This is the place where our Lord laid down his life for us. I want to lay down my life for you."

Fasting and almsgiving. The bridegroom and his bride, the Church. You and I today, invited to lay down our lives for the one who held nothing back from us.

Key Passages

Entrance Antiphon: *The Lord heard and had mercy on me.*

Collect: *Show favour, O Lord, to the works of penance we have begun, that we may have strength to accomplish the bodily observances we undertake.*

Isaiah: *Shout out! Do not hold back! Announce to my people their rebellion, their sins. Yet day after day they seek me and delight to know my ways, as if they were a nation that practised righteousness and did not forsake the ordinance of their God. You serve your own interest on your fast day and oppress all your workers. Such fasting will not make your voice heard on high. The fast that I choose is to loose the bonds of injustice. Is it not to share your bread with the hungry? Then your light shall break forth like the dawn. Then you shall call and the Lord will answer.*

Psalms: *Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love. According to your abundant mercy, blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin. Against you, you alone, have I sinned, and done what is evil in your sight. If I were to give a burnt offering, you would not be pleased. The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit, a broken contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.*

Matthew: *The disciples of John came to Jesus, saying, "Why do we and the Pharisees fast often, but your disciples do not fast?" Jesus said to them, "The wedding guests cannot mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them, can they? The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast."*