

Year A – Ash Wednesday, 2008

In the name of the God who created us, redeemed us from sin and empowers us for life. Amen.

In just a few minutes, I am going to stand before you and invite us all to the observance of a holy Lenten season. I will talk about a, “season of penitence and fasting ...,” and a “message of pardon and absolution.” In this invitation, the Prayer Book suggests that during Lent we should engage in self-examination and repentance, in prayer and fasting and self-denial. Every Epiphany, we people of God spend time trying to decide what we will deny ourselves during Lent so that we will engage in a holy season. And isn’t fasting the most “serious,” or pious of Lenten activities? After all, Moses fasted during his time on the mountain, encountering God. And it is Jesus’ time of testing in the wilderness – forty days of fasting – that we recall during this season. Lent is a time of self-denial on the way to a new encounter with the resurrected Christ.

Fasting is typically abstaining from some or all of the foods and drinks that we love. Lent is a time of reflection and introspection, and giving up worldly pleasures is a good way to get into, and a reminder of, the proper mindset. However, we must look very closely at what we will be doing – and more importantly, why we are doing it – in order to avoid the pitfalls that Isaiah talks about in today’s Old Testament reading.

During my last year of seminary I was involved in an extended fast. Although I know you can’t tell by looking at me today, over a period of a couple of months, I lost about thirty pounds as the result of very effective fasting. What made me lose the

weight was an illness which, at its worst, completely drained me of all appetite. It did not matter what the food was, or what time of day or night it was, I just did not care about it and therefore did not bother to eat it. While this was without a doubt a fast, it was not an effective fast in terms of bettering my relationship with God. Both the Old Testament lesson and the Gospel for today address why that might be.

One of the readings we could have used today in place of the reading from Joel, comes from Isaiah. In that reading the prophet talked to the people about what he saw as insincerity or a lack of authenticity in their religious practices. What Isaiah was commenting on in this passage is the same thing that Jesus talks about in Matthew's Gospel reading, a religious practice done for a reason other than the furtherance of the relationship with God. While my fast was definitely not done with any bad motive, it is the same situation, in that the fast was not centered on my relationship with God and therefore did not have any religious significance. In order to have meaning in the context of our relationship with God, a fast must be done with God as its centerpiece. Such a fast, entered into with God as the central point of the exercise, can be incredibly powerful.

St. John Chrysostom, one of the early Church fathers, and one of the great preachers of the Church's first thousand years, said of fasting that, as much as we humans are able, fasting is an,

imitation of the angels, a condemning of things present, a school of prayer, a nourishment of the soul, a bridle of the mouth, ...: [He said fasting] mollifies rage, it appeases anger, it calms the tempests of nature, it excites reason, it clears the mind, it disburdens the flesh, .... By fasting,

[Chrysostom said] a man gets composed behavior, free utterance of his tongue, right apprehensions of his mind.

If we decide to take up a fast as a part of our discipline during this Lenten season, we can look at the Christian Church through the centuries for some information on *how* the fast is conducted. Traditionally, in the Western Christian Church, there were five levels of fasting, each being more stringent than the one before. First, we can abstain from eating meat during the fast. That is probably the most often practiced of the traditional Christian fasts. Next, we can abstain from eating meat, milk, butter and cheese. That sounds very much like the vegetarian diets that are popular in Austin today. The third level is abstention from meat, eggs, milk, butter, cheese and fish. The fourth level of fasting includes meat, eggs, milk, butter, cheese and fish and also gives up oil and wine. The final level of fasting is the one that – in 21<sup>st</sup> century terms – matches the diet of John the Baptist, a man who knew a thing or two about fasting and prayer. In this most stringent of fasts, we abstain from all food and drink, except bread, water, juices, honey and nuts. Note that we eat nuts as a source of protein, rather than the locusts that John the Baptist ate. And in the tradition of the Church, each of these fasting disciplines may be exercised every day except Sunday (which is always a feast day) or only on Wednesdays and Fridays – Wednesday for the day that Jesus was betrayed and Friday for the day of his death on the cross.

As you can see, there is an almost infinite number of ways of fasting in the tradition of the Christian Church. So if I choose a level of fasting and days of the week that work for me, am I guaranteed to have a “successful” fast, one that will reconnect

and reenergize my relationship with God? The simple answer is, “No.” This is where we must look to Isaiah for guidance.

Isaiah told the people of Israel all those centuries ago, and the same is true today, it really does not matter *how* you fast, or *when* you fast. It only matters *why* you fast and *what* the fast represents in your life. Fasting should function, as I read recently, as an alarm clock for our prayer life. Whatever we give up as a part of our fast should be something that we eat or drink fairly often, something that is important enough to us that its cravings will be strong enough to shake us into remembering why we are doing without. This is the alarm clock that calls us to prayer – right then and right there, when we recognize that we are doing without something we want. Instead of a candy bar, we get a prayer – not a “please God make this craving go away” type prayer – but rather, an honest conversation with God about whatever is on your hearts in that moment when the alarm goes off and we are unexpectedly called to prayer. The reminder of God’s central place in our lives is one of the best reasons for a fast. However, the fast should not, indeed **cannot** be limited to a project to improve our prayer life – no matter how important that may be.

As Isaiah said, the fast must go beyond us. In order to be a fast that is pleasing to God, it must be something that impacts God’s creation in a larger way. Our Lenten fast must have as a component the loosing of the bonds of injustice, the undoing of the thongs of the yoke and letting the oppressed go free. What we do not eat during our fast should be food that goes to the hungry. The gnawing of our stomachs during our fast

should be a reminder that we have not yet remembered to take that bag of clothes in the trunk of our car to the Christian Care Center or the Salvation Army. Our hunger pangs should remind us of the broken relationships in our lives and the call of God for us to be the ones to start repairing those relationships. Our doing without during Lent must help us see and recognize all of the injustice that goes on around us every day, and our cravings need to be translated into a craving to right those wrongs – a need to do justice and mercy in the world.

If our fast is done in these ways, then, as Isaiah says, our “light shall break forth like the dawn and (our) healing shall spring up quickly; (our) vindicator shall go before (us), the glory of the LORD shall be (our) rear guard. Then (we) shall call, and the LORD will answer, (we) shall cry for help and (the Lord) will say, Here I am.” If we allow our fast to serve as the catalyst for removing the yoke from among us, the pointing fingers and the evil tongues, then the Lord will “guide our way continually, satisfy our needs in parched places and make our bones strong. We shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail.” That is quite a promise God makes to us, if we will simply enter into a truly holy fast, the rewards God promises are phenomenal.

Let me close with some summarizing words on fasting – again from St. John Chrysostom.

Do you fast? Give me proof of it by your works.

If you see a poor man, take pity on him.

Do not let only your mouth fast, but also the eye and the ear and the feet and the hands and all the members of our bodies.

Let the hands fast, by being free of avarice.

Let the feet fast, by ceasing to run after sin.

Let the eyes fast, by disciplining them not to **glare** at that which is **sinful**.

Let the ear fast, by not listening to evil talk and **gossip**.

Let the mouth fast from foul words **and unjust criticism**.

For what good is it if we abstain from birds and fishes, but bite and devour our brothers?

May He who came to the world to save sinners strengthen us to complete the fast with humility, have mercy on us and save us.

Amen.