

1st Sunday of Lent, 21 February 2021

Scriptures: Genesis 9:8-15; 1 Peter 3:18-22; Mark 1:12-15

Homily: Fr. Ken

In the first reading, from the Book of Genesis, we learn that after the flood, the rainbow is described as God's promise not to destroy the earth.

In the second reading, from the First Letter of Peter, St. Peter reminds his readers that the Noah story now takes on a new meaning. The water of baptism is not the means of washing off dirt or destroying what is unclean, but rather it is a source of new life, a life with and in God.

In the Gospel pericope. St Mark narrates that following Jesus' temptations in the wilderness, Jesus begins his ministry with the call to repentance.

Repentance and reconciliation were preached by St. Paul and the other Biblical authors including St. Peter, when they wrote to the Christians in the earliest Christian communities.

As the season of Lent begins, we are reminded that reconciliation and fasting are very much a part of the Lenten season.

Every year when Lent comes around, you find people, especially young Catholic students asking each other, even today, what they are giving up for Lent, as part of the Lenten fast.

Although the Bible, in both the New Testament and the Hebrew Scriptures, gives precise and exact details regarding the practice of fasting, there are striking exceptions. The prophet Isaiah for one speaks of a very different kind of fasting. Isaiah does not tell the people that for their fasting they should give up bacon, or beer, or their Samsung Galaxy S21 Ultra 5G. No, what Isaiah says is a radical departure from the tradition. He states:

*"This is the fasting that I wish:
releasing those bound unjustly,
untying the thongs of the yoke,
setting free the oppressed,
breaking every yoke,
sharing your bread with the hungry,
sheltering the oppressed and the homeless,
clothing the naked when you see them,
and not turning your back on your own".
(Isaiah 58:6-7)*

So, now we have two very different types of fasting. What should we do?

We can begin by asking: What is fasting, from a historical-critical perspective?

The word "fasting" has its etymological derivation in the Hebrew word *sŭm*, and the Greek word *nēsteuō*, meaning "to fast".

Fasting is a practice found in all societies, cultures, and religions, throughout history. Its motivation derives from a variety of objectives and rationales. Although fasting is a well-established spiritual discipline occurring in both the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament, and other religious literature, it is not confined to religious usage.

The famous fasting of Mahatma Gandhi, for example, or the fasting of various different hunger strikes, are all well-known and effective instruments of political pressure and protest against injustice, often evoking admiration.

Soup suppers and abstention from food for the purpose of identifying with the poor, and for fundraising for the needy, are clearly Christlike, reflecting the scripture reading from Isaiah the prophet, as well as the very challenging narration of the final judgment in Matthew's Gospel (Matthew 25:31-46).

In the context of religious history, fasting is abstention from food for ethical or religious reasons. Historically, fasting in poor as well as in the more advanced societies is based on the experience that while food provides strength for the spirit by giving physical strength, human persons nonetheless disturb and destroy the inner order of spirit and body if they fail to control the amount one eats and drinks, as seen today, for example, in the crisis of obesity among youth.

Returning now explicitly to the Scriptures, we find in the Hebrew Scriptures that the primitive concept of fasting can also be found in the beginning of the Old Testament where fasting is part of common vigilance in the service of God. In an individualized and spiritualized form, it can be seen in Exodus 34:28 where Moses pleads for his people through his fasting. According to the prophets, fasting must be an expression of a comprehensive, radical turning toward God and the commandments, particularly love of one's neighbor; otherwise, it is without value.

In the New Testament, according to Matthew 4:1 ff. and Luke 4: 1 ff., Jesus began his public life with a forty days' fast in the desert. It designated the beginning of Jesus' work as that of a prophet. In Matthew 6:17, it becomes clear that Jesus valued fasting as a personal expression of spirituality. Jesus also appears to have observed the prescribed collective fasts: Jesus' sovereign attitude towards fasting corresponds with the mentions of the observance of fasting by the very early Church, as evidenced in the Acts of the Apostles and in St. Paul's Letters.

In time, fasting was gradually accorded greater significance in early Christianity and was used as a kind of penance (especially under the influence of Celtic penitential practice).

Having briefly referenced fasting in both the Old and New Testaments, what can briefly be said about the theology of fasting?

First, a theological approach must start from the fact that we must, through fasting, dispose ourselves (even materially) to allowing

our neighbor to share our property in spite of the just claims of self-love. The unconditional demands of love are based, theologically, on the example of Christ and his identification with his neighbor. This is most obvious in the narrative of the final judgment (Matthew 25:31-43). Pope Paul VI, for example, stressed the connection between fasting and love. He noted: "Nations who enjoy economic plenty have a duty of self-denial, combined with an active proof of love towards our brothers and sisters who are tormented by poverty and hunger".

Second, fasting further retains in principle the valued position in the Christian life which tradition has accorded it within the sphere of a person's relationship to oneself, that is, in the integration of the body (according to St. Paul) into the whole life of religious faith.

Having considered the Lenten themes of repentance and the age-old practice of fasting, the question naturally emerges on this First Sunday of Lent: "What are you doing for Lent?"

The United States Catholic Bishops, reflecting on the lack of peace in so many nations throughout our world, with such an overwhelming impact of violence especially inflicted upon children, offered us this challenge: "As a tangible sign of our need and desire to do penance we, for the cause of peace in our world, commit ourselves to fast and abstinence on each Friday of the year. We call upon our people voluntarily to do penance on Friday by eating less food and by abstaining from meat. This return to a traditional practice of penance, once well observed in the U.S. Church, should be accompanied by works of charity and service toward our neighbors. Every Friday should be a day significantly devoted to prayer, penance, and almsgiving for peace.

They then remind us of the exhortation from the prophet Isaiah: "This is the fasting that I wish...sharing your bread with the hungry..."