

The Fast That God Seeks

A Reflection for the First Week of Lent

The three traditional practices taken up by Christians during the season of Lent are prayer, fasting, and alms-giving. In the reading to the right, the Prophet Isaiah challenges us to deepen our understanding of fasting, beyond simply reducing the intake of food and drink.

Fasting, according to Isaiah, is related to liberation from what oppresses and doing the works of mercy: feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, and sheltering the homeless. In the first reading from Catholic Social Teaching (below), God is experienced as one who knows the suffering of his oppressed people and responds to their oppression by an act of liberation.

Biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann, in his classic pastoral book *The Bible Makes Sense*, notes that God is revealed in both the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures as a freedom-giver (one who liberates from oppression), exile-ender/home-bringer (one who brings people home from exile and gives them a place in community), and life-giver (one who gives and restores life). Brueggemann then notes that this is also our call; we, too, are called to be freedom-givers, exile-enders, and life-givers.

Reflection Questions

- 1) What is your understanding of fasting? How does the reading from Isaiah challenge that understanding?
- 2) How can you be an agent of “freedom-giving” (liberation of those oppressed by various burdens) in our society?
- 3) Have you ever felt in exile? If so, what helped you to find home again?

Readings for the First Friday in Lent

- Isaiah 58:1-9a
- Psalms 51:3-4, 5-6ab, 18-19
- Matthew 9:14-15

Isaiah 58:1-9a

Thus says the Lord GOD:
Cry out full-throated and unsparingly,
lift up your voice like a trumpet blast;
Tell my people their wickedness,
and the house of Jacob their sins.
They seek me day after day,
and desire to know my ways,
Like a nation that has done what is just
and not abandoned the law of their God;
They ask me to declare what is due them,
pleased to gain access to God.
“Why do we fast, and you do not see it?
afflict ourselves, and you take no note of it?”

Lo, on your fast day you carry out your own pursuits,
and drive all your laborers.
Yes, your fast ends in quarreling and fighting,
striking with wicked claw.
Would that today you might fast
so as to make your voice heard on high!

Is this the manner of fasting I wish,
of keeping a day of penance:
That a man bow his head like a reed
and lie in sackcloth and ashes?
Do you call this a fast,
a day acceptable to the LORD?
This, rather, 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.
Then your light shall break forth like the dawn,
and your wound shall quickly be healed;
Your vindication shall go before you,
and the glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard.
Then you shall call, and the LORD will answer,
you shall cry for help, and he will say: Here I am!



We Are Called To Be Exile-Enders, Life-Givers, and Freedom-Givers

According to the Book of Exodus, the Lord speaks these words to Moses: "I have seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt, and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters; I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them..." (Ex 3:7-8). The gratuitous presence of God ... is manifested in the freeing from slavery..."

-- *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, #21

Looking to...the depth of [Mary's] faith expressed in the words of the *Magnificat*, Christ's disciples are called to renew ever more fully in themselves "the awareness that the truth about God who saves, the truth about God who is the source of every gift, cannot be separated from the manifestation of his love of preference for the poor and humble, that love which, celebrated in the *Magnificat*, is later expressed in the words and works of Jesus."

-- *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, #59

The Church, sharing in mankind's joys and hopes, in its anxieties and sadness, stands with every man and woman of every place and time, to bring them the good news of the Kingdom of God... In the midst of mankind and in the world she is the sacrament of God's love...which inspires and sustains every authentic undertaking for and commitment to human liberation and advancement.

-- *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, #60

...(T)he Church teaches that one should assist one's fellow man in his various needs... "Among all these, giving alms to the poor is one of the chief witnesses to fraternal charity: it is also a work of justice pleasing to God," even if the practice of charity is not limited to alms-giving but implies addressing the social and political dimensions of the problem of poverty.

-- *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, #184

Lord, let us fast in the way you seek.

We thank you for your graciousness, for your attentiveness to our burdens that are oppressive and that oppress.

You bring freedom and lift the burdens that weigh down your people, burdens that keep us from attaining the fullness of life you promised through your Son, our brother Jesus, in his proclamation of the Kingdom of God.

We know that you are aware of the suffering that has befallen your people because of our blindness and deafness to the needs of our brothers and sisters.

Lord, let us fast in the way you seek.

Forgive us our quarrelling and greed and free us from the habits and bias that impede solidarity with all those who need the basics for life: food, clothing, and shelter.

Lord, let us fast in the way you seek.

Amen.

