

Fifth Week of Lent: Christian Fasting (I)

Thursday 2nd April 2020

Ash Wednesday seems a lifetime ago especially as we all continue to adjust to the present circumstances of lock-down in the fight against the Coronavirus. This new way of daily living is proving to have many blessings as well as many challenges. People are finding themselves confined in the same place with others for long periods of time with only short breaks for necessary shopping and brief spells of exercise. My brother told me on the phone how wonderful it was that he and his wife and their two boys have been able to spend quality time together over the last week. However, my 3 year old nephew is now starting to “climb the walls” and my bother thinks he’s getting “cabin fever”! Tension is building! This tension can sometimes spill over into words of frustration, impatience and anger. How many families have experienced this already? For those who are on their own, they too do not escape this challenge of hurtful words. The phone, emails and other social media allows angry words into their physically isolated spaces as well as the opportunity for them to direct negative words to others.



What to do? Well I think it is worth keeping in mind one of the tools the Lord spoke about in the Ash Wednesday Gospel.

‘When you fast do not put on a gloomy look as the hypocrites do: they pull long faces to let men know they are fasting...’ (Mt 6:16)

Fasting is not a popular subject especially in our Western consumer culture which talks about opulent comforts, excessive luxury, and the worship of self.

Advertisers tells us we need this or that product and if we don’t have them, then

our lives are not incomplete. Sadly, in the Western world you even hear many people say during Lent – ‘You don’t have to give up anything just do something extra instead!’ To fast is to give up something, to abstain, do without, sacrifice a little luxury and comfort. It is quite obvious when Our Lord speaks in the Gospel that he assumes people are already practising fasting: ‘*When you fast...*’ he says. He does not say, ‘*If you fast*’, ‘*Could you fast*’ or even ‘*Fast when it suits you*’ but simply ‘*When you fast*’. He takes it for granted that those who are believers automatically do this. In fasting we are reminding ourselves that our happiness does not depend on material objects but solely on God Himself. Comforts are nice and bring a little joy but it is only God who gives us eternal bliss. When we fast we humble ourselves before our Loving Creator and acknowledge that without Him we are simply dust.

So how does Jesus’ teaching about fasting help us in our relationships during the coronavirus lock-down? Well maybe we can do a fast of the tongue. In the Bible the letter of James reminds us that though the tongue be only a small part of the human body it can have a powerful effect.

‘So is the tongue only a tiny part of the body, but it can proudly claim that it does great things. Think how small a flame can set fire to a huge forest; the tongue is a flame like that...’ (Jm 3:5–6a)

In hurtful words from frustrated grumblings to impatient mumblings others can be wounded and feel even more isolated than they already are. Let us fast from using the tongue to hurt. We may be harassed, tired and worried but before we speak, before we let loose the tongue let us think of its consequences for those loved ones we live with and those friends and family at the other end of the phone and email.

I have found myself this week having to deal with some irrelevant bureaucracy. It would have been so easy to unleash my tongue and berate the person at the other end of the phone. If I had given into that temptation I’m sure for a few moments I would have felt better because it would have let me feel as though I was in control of something for the first time since the coronavirus pandemic and it would have released a lot of pent up frustration. However, I found myself biting my tongue instead and fasting from the barrage of caustic insults and negative words. As James writes in his letter ‘*the tongue is a flame...*’ and once control is lost of the flame it can burn down whole forests and moorlands causing devastation. It takes a long time for things to heal and mend from its destructive power. The tongue has the same power. It can be used for good and for bad. I recognise that if I am to call myself a disciple of Jesus Christ then I have to embrace his way, his

command and his cross of love. Fasting from the tongue is part of the road towards being in his loving presence forever.

Thank you to all those who have rang up and left messages asking if I am okay. To those who have left little presents at the door, you are all very kind and I'm doing well. It's like being a monk again! I have tried to ring up as many people as I have phone numbers for but as you can imagine that is a pretty big task. I'm not even halfway through the list yet so please don't feel left out if I've not rang - I'm getting there. Do feel free to ring the presbytery if you want a prayer or a chat. The mornings are the best.

As always keep praying

God Bless

Fr. O'Brien