

The Way of Jesus

Week 7

*A 12 Week Seminar for Students of Jesus
St Stephens/Sewickley
January-March 2010*

Opening Discussion:

How did it go with 'slowing' last week?

With resting?

Fasting

Reflections

From Geoff:

"During these weeks of Lent we are looking at and learning from the lifestyle of Jesus. For Jesus' disciples, following Christ meant living with him in order to learn to live *like* him. They would see what he did in between the big events of his life - how he lived his normal days over many weeks, months and years spent together. Those normal days became the place where the disciples learned Jesus' habits. It was during the normal days that the disciples saw Jesus' choices and watched the customs that shaped His life and revealed His character. Just as Jesus' choices, habits and customs shaped His life and revealed His character ... our choices, habits and customs shape and define our lives and reveal our character. That is why Jesus' lifestyle matters to us and why our lifestyles matter.

"Our mistake is believing that we can live our everyday lives just like everyone else does and still follow Jesus, obey Jesus, and respond and react like Jesus in the crises and challenges of our lives. We can't. Jesus didn't live His life like everyone else. So the Christian life takes studying His life and training, training to learn to live like Christ. Our choices need to be informed by His choices. Our habits need to reflect His habits. Our character can only become like His if we live like He did.

That is what we are looking at over Lent."

Jesus' Habit of Fasting

In Luke 4: we find a familiar passage that highlights the **story behind the bigger story of Jesus' life**. It is a snapshot of the lifestyle that supported **an extraordinary life of love, endurance, steadfastness and power**.

And Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan, and was led by the Spirit for forty days in the wilderness, tempted by the devil. And he ate nothing in those days; and when they were ended, he was hungry.

Luke 4:1-2 (RSV)

Jesus has just come from his baptism in the Jordan River which is essentially the launch of his public ministry. Many remarkable things happened that day including the Holy Spirit descending upon Jesus in bodily form 'like a dove'. And it says that Jesus heard the **voice of his Father**... And, immediately following the baptism, Jesus leaves. Does he leave to minister in Jerusalem? Or in Rome?

Jesus begins his ministry (and the rest of his life) in the desert. He does not see a single human for 40 days. He leaves the river for the desert mountains where He is alone with God. He fasts in silence for 40 days. In the end, He withstands the temptations of Satan.

What we see at the beginning of Luke 4 is Jesus **establishing the pattern of his life** and **it is worth looking carefully at this thing Jesus does first ... fasting.**

What Fasting Is:

Fasting is the voluntary abstinence from food for spiritual purposes. There are all kinds of fasts recorded in the Bible:

- normal fasts which are defined by total abstinence of food but not from water (the one we are looking at here in Luke 4).
- partial fasts which are a limitation of foods but not total abstention from food: (Daniel and the three young men who ate only vegetables and drank water).
- absolute fasts which avoid all food and liquid (the famous Esther story where the Jews fasted and prayed for three days before she went to the king. Paul after his conversion who for three days was blind and did not eat or drink anything).
- supernatural fasts (Moses on Sinai & Elijah on Horeb).
- private fasts.
- congregational fasts
- national fasts
- liturgical fasts.

When we talk today about a fast, we most often speak of a normal fast (like Jesus' forty day fast) meaning an abstention from food but not water.

Clear Call to Fast: What is most obvious in studying fasting in the Bible is that fasting is meant to be a priority in the life of all Christians. Jesus clearly expected his followers to fast. Jesus says: "When you fast " just like he says "when you give or when you pray." These things were expected - often in tandem.

And Fasting is always done for a spiritual purpose. It's more than simply abstaining from food ... there must be spiritual purpose to our fasts or they are not Christian - simply an extreme diet.

Geoff: "Fasting in the words of Zechariah, is done 'unto the Lord.' In the words of Jesus, it is done for 'your Father who is in secret, who sees what you do in secret, and rewards you'. This is a key to all the spiritual disciplines of Jesus. They are done for the Father, in order to be with the Father, to listen to the Father's voice in scripture, to follow the leading of the Father's Spirit, to seek the Father's face."

10 Biblical Purposes for Fasting Found in the Bible:
(from *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life* by Donald Whitney):

- to **strengthen prayer** (this is not "a spiritual hunger strike compelling God to do our bidding: fasting does not change God's hearing so much as it changes our praying." "Fasting is one of the best friends we can introduce to our prayer life." Daniel).
- to **seek God's guidance** (there is biblical precedent for fasting for the purpose of more clearly discerning the will of God." "Rightly practiced it makes us more receptive to the One who loves to guide us." Paul & Barnabas when selecting elders of the church.)
- to **express grief** (fasting is frequently an expression of grief ... grief over a death like Israel when Saul was killed, over our sins, over the departure of a loved one from faith, etc).
- to **seek deliverance or protection** (to seek salvation from enemies or circumstances Esther and David did this)

- to **express repentance and the return to God** (similar to expressing grief but “as repentance is a change of mind resulting in a change of action, fasting can represent more than just grief over sins. It can signal a commitment to obedience and a new direction: the Ninevites in Joel 2:12)
- to **humble oneself before God** (Ahab did this ... King David .. fasting is an expression of humility).
- to **express concern for the work of God** (we fast for ministries or “the work of God in a broader scope.” Nehemiah – good example)
- to **minister to the needs of others** (Isaiah 58:6-7 fasting for the purpose of meeting the needs of others. You can’t fast and not meet the needs of others and have that a pleasing thing to the Lord. There must be concern for others just as much as concern for our own spiritual and material well-being).
- to **overcome temptation and dedicate ourselves to God** (Jesus during the 40 days)
- to **express love and worship to God** (Anna in the temple ... night and day for up to 40-50 years ... worshipping in the temple fasting and praying. Preparation for the Eucharist).

Soul Nourishing Habits:

Fasting & Prayer & Almsgiving are all soul nourishing habits and are often practiced together. We in the West seem to have lost our souls under piles of stuff. So much of our lives are surface, mostly material, mostly demanding agendas ... little soul level spiritual depth. The good news is that fasting in tandem with prayer and almsgiving gives us the opportunity to unload the surface things and nourish the soul.

Results:

And when the devil had ended every temptation, he departed from him until an opportune time. And Jesus returned in the power of the Spirit into Galilee, and a report concerning him went out through all the surrounding country. And he taught in their synagogues, being glorified by all. Luke 4:13-15 (RSV)

There is **linkage** between verses 1-2 and 13-15. The spiritual disciplines are potential pathways to the strength, wisdom and grace of the Father, and to the power of God in ministry and life. **If spiritual disciplines were so important to Jesus, they should also be important to us.**

Reflection

And when you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by others. Truly I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, that your fasting may not be seen by others but by your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you. Matthew 6.16-18

Two quotes on fasting from ancient Christian saints:

Abba Daniel of Sketis:

'In proportion as the body grows fat, so does the soul wither away.'

St Symeon the New Theologian:

'Let each one of us keep in mind the benefit of fasting... For this healer of our souls is effective, in the case of one to quieten the fevers and impulses of the flesh, in another to assuage bad temper, in yet another to drive away sleep, in another to stir up zeal, and in yet another to restore purity of mind and to set him free from evil thoughts. In one it will control his unbridled tongue and, as it were by a bit, restrain it by the fear of God and prevent it from uttering idle and corrupt words. In another it will invisibly guard his eyes and fix them on high instead of allowing them to roam hither and thither, and thus cause him to look on himself and teach him to be mindful of his own faults and shortcomings. Fasting gradually disperses and drives away spiritual darkness and the veil of sin that lies on the soul, just as the sun dispels the mist. Fasting enables us spiritually to see that spiritual air in which Christ, the Sun who knows no setting, does not rise, but shines without ceasing. Fasting, aided by vigil, penetrates and softens hardness of heart. Where once were the vapors of drunkenness it causes fountains of compunction to spring forth. I beseech you, brethren, let each of us strive

that this may happen in us! Once this happens we shall readily, with God's help, cleave through the whole sea of passions and pass through the waves of the temptations inflicted by the cruel tyrant, and so come to anchor in the port of impassibility. 'My brethren, it is not possible for these things to come about in one day or one week! They will take much time, labor, and pain, in accordance with each man's attitude and willingness, according to the measure of faith and one's contempt for the objects of sight and thought. In addition, it is also in accordance with the fervor of his ceaseless penitence and its constant working in the secret chamber of his heart that this is accomplished more quickly or more slowly by the gift and grace of God. But without fasting no one was ever able to achieve any of these virtues or any others, **for fasting is the beginning and foundation of every spiritual activity**'. — *Symeon the New Theologian: the Discourses*, pub. Paulist Press. pp. 168-169.

A Beautiful Excerpt from Bishop Kallistos Ware's paper on Lenten Fasting:

The primary aim of fasting is to make us conscious of our dependence upon God. If practiced seriously, the Lenten abstinence from food - particularly in the opening days - involves a considerable measure of real hunger, and also a feeling of tiredness and physical exhaustion. The purpose of this is to lead us in turn to a sense of inward brokenness and contrition; to bring us, that is, to the point where we appreciate the full force of Christ's statement, 'Without Me you can do nothing' (John 15: 5). If we always take our fill of food and drink, we easily grow over-confident in our own abilities, acquiring a false sense of autonomy and self-sufficiency. The observance of a physical fast undermines this sinful complacency. ... Such is the function of the hunger and the tiredness: to make us 'poor in spirit', aware of our helplessness and of our dependence on God's aid.

Yet it would be misleading to speak only of this element of weariness and hunger. Abstinence leads, not merely to this, but also to a sense of lightness, wakefulness, freedom and joy. Even if the fast proves debilitating at first, afterwards we find that it enables us to sleep less, to think more clearly, and to work more decisively. ... While involving genuine self-denial, fasting does not seek to do violence to our body but rather to restore it to health and equilibrium. Most of us in the Western world habitually eat more than we need. Fasting liberates our body from the burden of excessive weight and makes it a willing partner in the task of prayer, alert and responsive to the voice of the Spirit."

If it is important not to overlook the physical requirements of fasting, it is even more important not to overlook its inward significance. Fasting is not a mere matter of diet... True fasting is to be converted in heart and will; it is to return to God, to come home like the Prodigal to our Father's house. In the words of St. John Chrysostom, it means 'abstinence not only from food but from sins'. 'The fast', he insists, 'should be kept not by the mouth alone but also by the eye, the ear, the feet, the hands and all the members of the body': the eye must abstain from impure sights, the ear from malicious gossip, the hands from acts of injustice." It is useless to fast from food, protests St. Basil, and yet to indulge in cruel criticism and slander: 'You do not eat meat, but you devour your brother' .

The same point is made in the Triodion, especially during the first week of Lent: "As we fast from food, let us abstain also from every passion. . . "Let us observe a fast acceptable and pleasing to the Lord. True fasting is to put away all evil. To control the tongue, to forbear from anger. To abstain from lust, slander, falsehood and perjury. If we renounce these things, then is our fasting true and acceptable to God. Let us keep the Fast not only by refraining from food, but by becoming strangers to all the bodily passions. The inner significance of fasting is best summed up in the triad: prayer, fasting, almsgiving. Divorced from prayer and from the reception of the holy sacraments, unaccompanied by acts of compassion, our fasting becomes pharisaical or even demonic. It leads, not to contrition and joyfulness, but to pride, inward tension and irritability.

Fasting, then, is valueless or even harmful when not combined with prayer. In the Gospels the devil is cast out, not by fasting alone, but by 'prayer and fasting' (Matt. 17: 21 ; Mark 9: 29); and of the early Christians it is said, not simply that they fasted, but that they 'fasted and prayed' (Acts 13: 3; compare 14: 23). In both the Old and the New Testament fasting is seen, not as an end in itself, but as an aid to more intense and living prayer, as a preparation for decisive action or for direct encounter with God. Thus our Lord's forty-day fast in the wilderness was the immediate preparation for His public ministry (Matt. 4: 1-11). When Moses fasted on Mount Sinai (Exod. 34: 28) and Elijah on Mount Horeb (3 [1] Kgs. 19: 8-12), the fast was in both cases linked with a theophany. The same connection between fasting and the vision of God is evident in the case of St. Peter (Acts 10: 9-17). He 'went up on the housetop to pray about the sixth hour, and he became very hungry and wanted to eat; and it was in this state that he fell into a trance and heard the divine voice. Such is always the purpose of ascetic fasting - to enable us, as the Triodion puts it, to 'draw near to the mountain of prayer'.

Prayer and fasting should in their turn be accompanied by almsgiving - by love for others expressed in practical form, by works of compassion and forgiveness. Knowing the commandments of the Lord, let this be our way of life: Let us feed the hungry, let us give the thirsty drink, Let us clothe the naked, let us welcome strangers, Let us visit those in prison and the sick. Then the Judge of all the earth will say even to us: 'Come, ye blessed of My Father, inherit the Kingdom prepared for you.' 0

... If the Lenten texts are continually urging us to greater personal efforts, this should not be taken as implying that our progress depends solely upon the exertion of our own will. On the contrary, whatever we achieve in the Lenten fast is to be regarded as a free gift of grace from God. The Great Canon of St. Andrew of Crete leaves no doubt at all on this point: " I have no tears, no repentance, no compunction; But as God do Thou Thyself, O Saviour, bestow them on me.

Our fasting should not be self-willed but obedient. When we fast, we should not try to invent special rules for ourselves, but we should follow as faithfully as possible the accepted pattern set before us by Holy Tradition. If proud and willful, our fasting assumes a diabolical character, bringing us closer not to God but to Satan. Because fasting renders us sensitive to the realities of the spiritual world, it can be dangerously ambivalent: for there are evil spirits as well as good.

Paradoxical though it may seem, the period of Lent is a time not of gloom but of joyfulness . It is true that fasting brings us to repentance and to grief for sin, but this penitent grief, in the vivid phrase of St. John Climacus, is a 'joy-creating sorrow'. It is remarkable how frequently the themes of joy and light recur in the texts for the first day of Lent: With joy let us enter upon the beginning of the Fast. Let us not be of sad countenance. . . . Let us joyfully begin the all-hallowed season of abstinence; And let us shine with the bright radiance of the holy commandments. . . All mortal life is but one day, so it is said, To those who labor with love. There are forty days in the Fast; Let us keep them all with joy.

The season of Lent, it should be noted, falls not in midwinter when the countryside is frozen and dead, but in spring when all things are returning to life. The English word 'Lent' originally had the meaning 'springtime' ... Lent signifies not winter but spring, not darkness but light, not death but renewed vitality. In the Christian Empire of Byzantium theatres were closed and public spectacles forbidden during Lent; and even today weddings are forbidden in the seven weeks of the fast. Yet these elements of austerity should not blind us to the fact that the fast is not a burden, not a punishment, but a gift of God's grace:

Finally, our Lenten abstinence does not imply a rejection of God's creation . As St. Paul insists, 'Nothing is unclean in itself' (Rom. 14: 14). All that God has made is 'very good' (Gen. I: 31): to fast is not to deny this intrinsic goodness but to reaffirm it. 'To the pure all things are pure' (Titus I: I S), and so at the Messianic banquet in the Kingdom of heaven there will be no need for fasting and ascetic self-denial. But, living as we do in a fallen world, and suffering as we do from the consequences of sin, both original and personal, we are not pure; and so we have need of fasting. Evil resides not in created things as such but in our attitude towards them, that is, in our will. The purpose of fasting, then, is not to repudiate the divine creation but to cleanse our will. During the fast we deny our bodily impulses - for example, our spontaneous appetite for food and drink - not because these impulses are in themselves evil, but because they have been disordered by sin and require to be purified through self-discipline. In this way, asceticism is a fight not against but for the body; the aim of fasting is to purge the body from alien defilement and to render it spiritual. By rejecting what is sinful in our will, we do not destroy the God-created body but restore it to its true balance and freedom. In Father Sergei Bulgakov's phrase, we kill the flesh in order to acquire a body.

Father Akakios' book:

Some modernist Orthodox find in fasting and in the traditionalism of the Old Calendarists a way of life flatly opposed to the selfishness of the social values which they have learned and to which they cling. A whole generation of Orthodox, especially in the United States, has come to seek not spiritual goals, but the benefits of materialism. They strive to make of Orthodoxy a religion which validates the body and its pleasures, which places a blessing on wealth and possessions, and which puts the enhancement, not the death, of the ego at the zenith of human concerns. Their goal is not the transformation of fallen human nature, but the glorification of human life without the painful process necessary to its transformation.