

Fasting

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FASTING.

There is in all of us a certain unspiritual tendency to rest upon the “beggarly elements” and to submit ourselves to ordinances of Touch not, Taste not, Handle not. It is unspiritual for Christians to go back to these things, but they have a certain correspondence with spiritual facts and so never fail to make some appeal to those whose uneasy consciences are aware rather of themselves than of the merciful God revealed in Christ. Especially in these days of unrest and loosening of the ties of Christian brotherhood, we, who value the faith once delivered to the saints and the apostolic order of the Church by which that faith has been handed down the ages, are now more than ever tempted to cling to outward things with their clear definition and to forget the near and strong reality of the deeper principles for which S^t Paul among others contended so earnestly in his day. Let us therefore, lest we build upon the great foundation with worthless stubble, be careful in this respect. And now in particular let us treat of the great Church ordinance of the Lenten fast, and let us ask what such a season means for the individual soul.

In the first place what does the word fasting mean? Strictly and simply, to go without bodily food. But of course the lack of bodily food, like any other thing in our experience, may be taken as a picture of something else. Thus figuratively it is sometimes used to denote the lack of any bodily gratification, sometimes even the effort of active good.

For the literal sense we may quote our Lord's words: If I send the multitude away fasting they will faint by the way. Or S^t Paul's, when he describes himself as having been in stripes, in imprisonments, in tumults, in labours, in sleeplessness, in fastings. In these instances there is obviously nothing

more in question than mere involuntary lack of sufficient food. But fasting was also a recognised religious observance which, as is clear enough from the gospels, was regarded by the Pharisees as of obligation. At certain times, as they held, a truly religious man was bound to deprive himself of his ordinary food. So the connotation of religious observance is often found in the word.

For the figurative sense it will be sufficient to quote the prophet Isaiah: Is not this the fast that I have chosen to loose the bands of wickedness?

We may now proceed to the all-important point of what our Lord's practice was, and what his teaching, in the matter of fasting as a religious exercise.

There are those who press the words He used at His baptism, "It becometh us to fulfil all righteousness", and understand that He submitted to every religious ordinance of His day even where He never meant that His disciples should retain the same for all time. If we take this view we shall of course believe without doubt that He practised fasting. But in this case we should learn nothing of value for ourselves, for it would still remain to be decided whether fasting were to be regarded as a judaic observance like circumcision that might well be allowed to pass away, or whether it were to be classed with the weightier matters, judgment, mercy, and faith.

It is certain indeed that Jesus accepted the spiritual essence of the law and presented Himself as the true fulfilment of the Messianic hope of Israel. But few, I think, have any doubt but that He held Himself independent alike of any rigorist interpretation and of all traditional detail. With regard to fasting then we must search the record for His example and precepts, and receive them as in general directly applicable to ourselves.

The remarkable fact at once presents itself that we do not know whether our Lord habitually, or even on any single occasion, practised fasting as a religious exercise.

At this there will doubtless come into our minds the remembrance of the great forty days in the wilderness, in respect of which indeed our Lenten fast has been finally extended to a like period. The narrative tells us that Jesus was led by

the spirit into the wilderness, being forty days tempted of the devil. And in those days He ate nothing. And when they were ended He afterward hungered.

These are words that present to us a time of mental stress and agony so great that there was no desire for food. The idea that the abstention from food was a deliberately undertaken exercise, so far from being suggested, would actually mar the force with which the spiritual conflict is painted.

Solemn indeed are the lessons of the 40 days, but it remains that there is no record that our Lord ever practised fasting in the sense with which we are now concerned.

Even if we take the word in a sense slightly wider than the literal we fail equally to find that He ever fasted deliberately, that He ever sought out suffering as being in itself a direct road to spiritual gain, or in any way an acceptable offering to the Father. That which came upon Him daily in the plain course of his duty was a different matter. That came upon Him abundantly, and He never turned aside from it one hairsbreadth. But He never sought it.

On the other hand we are never told that He did not fast. In fact the only indication that we have in any direction, and it is far from being decisive, is this, that His disciples, His school as we should call them now, did not fast. Why do we, said the followers of John the Baptist, fast oft, but Thy disciples fast not? Notwithstanding what Jesus says about secrecy, it is not easy to suppose that His disciples could have failed to be aware of, to speak about, and finally to imitate the real example of their Lord in such a point as this.

But yet dialectically no peremptory assertion can be made on either side. Those who have a sure conviction must at any rate found it on deeper and more subtle grounds than can well be made to carry a formal argument that will be accepted generally as convincing.

But this our ignorance is perhaps after all the best thing for us. It should be a restraint upon dogmatising in either direction upon a matter which after all lies between the individual soul and God, and is perhaps useful to one and injurious to another.

Let us now turn to our Lord's teaching. This of course will throw back light upon His practice also. But as in fact

it will not enable us to speak with any closer approach to certainty, we may consider it at once in its direct bearing on ourselves.

To the followers of John the Baptist who spoke to Him of the failure of His own disciples to practice fasting He replied, "Can the children of the bridechamber mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them? But the days will come when the bridegroom shall be taken away from them, and then shall they fast in those days."

Here the words "then shall they fast" are by some strangely taken as a command. I say "strangely", on the ground to begin with of mere grammar. In a clear and simple case in the direct address of the second person the future tense may certainly and quite naturally be used as an imperative, as for example in the commandment "Thou shalt do no murder". But where the sentence is complex, where there is a distinct contrast of times so that the future tense is necessary in any case, where finally the verb is in the third person, it cannot be taken as creating an obligation binding upon the third persons in question. It may indeed rest upon a determination in the speaker's mind to impose that obligation. But whether in fact it rests upon that, or upon some other consideration such as the recognition of a coming necessity, must be ascertained both from the general sense of the passage and from the presence or absence of any command on the matter given by the speaker on other occasions. In either case in itself the verb remains a simple future expressing a simple future fact, and it is inconceivable that any one would attempt to employ it in any other intention.

To pass on to the sense of the passage, what a strange command this would be! The presence of the bridegroom means a time of joy. In the present instance probably the joy of the disciples is regarded as being due to the presence of Jesus Himself, but the very use of the figurative expression shows that the essential point is their actual happiness. Are we to understand then that when they were happy and light hearted and felt no inclination to impose a fast upon themselves then they need not, but that as soon as affliction fell upon them, and their hearts grew heavy, then immediately it was to become their duty to add fresh and artificial affliction?

Is it not rather the case that Jesus, in thoroughly characteristic fashion, is putting a deep and spiritual sense upon the keyword of a discourse which his questioners were using in a literal and even technical sense? When the bridegroom shall be taken away from them, then indeed will they fast. Their fast will consist in the very lot which shall fall upon them, and it will be all-sufficient. It is not a question of a binding ordinance and of outward observance, but of deepreaching unavoidable realities.

It is not said that in the Bridegroom's presence they are not called upon to fast, but that they cannot. So in His absence they will not be able to escape the fast, lying as it will in the very fact of the absence. As ever, it was only they who had ears to hear that could find profit in the words of our Lord.

We may turn next to the exhortation contained in the Sermon on the Mount. "When ye fast be not as the hypocrites of a sad countenance. For they disfigure their faces that they may appear unto men to fast. Verily I say unto you they have their reward. But thou, when thou fastest, anoint thy head and wash thy face, that thou appear not unto men to fast, but unto thy Father which is in secret. And thy Father which seeth in secret shall reward thee openly".

The word hypocrite is very instructive. Its meaning in the New Testament is not so essentially bad as that which we have now learned to ascribe to it. Of itself it means an actor, and so describes one who deliberately assumes a pose that is not necessarily the true expression of himself. Whether he do this in order to gain credit and so advantage for himself, or in order to set what he believes to be a good example, or simply because an external pose is all that he is capable of grasping, he is in any case a hypocrite, a man who poses. Jesus then tells those that fasted that they were not to treat their fasting as if it were in any way a matter of public concern. It was to be entirely between God and themselves.

It is quite clear that our Lord is dealing here with the literal fast, with the deprivation of food self-inflicted as a religious penance or exercise. No other application of the word would give sense. What is it then that He says? He finds the practice in wide use, in fact in religious circles with the exception of His own near followers universally so, and He gives directions as to how it may be profitably observed. He

recognises that it may be used for good under certain conditions, but He does not positively recommend it, much less does He command it.

In the same discourse indeed He speaks of prayer in the same way. He treats it as an established custom, and it may be granted that He adds no exhortation for its observance. For it is possible to regard the model prayer which He supplies as being conditioned by the opening phrase "When ye pray". But even so it does not follow that both customs are of equal value. Our high actual esteem for prayer even if it depended solely upon texts would not be due to the passage before us; that is of course to grant the light in which, for the purpose of establishing so far a parallel between prayer and fasting, we are regarding the introduction of the Lord's Prayer.

Let us however turn over the other pages of the gospels and we shall find that as for prayer Jesus lived in it and constantly encouraged His disciples to do the like. With regard to fasting we shall fail to find one single instance either of His practising the ceremonial fast, or of His urging it upon His disciples even where their non-observance is the subject of His discourse.

Yet He says "Thy Father which seeth in secret shall reward thee openly".

There is only one interpretation which can reconcile these otherwise inconsistent phenomena. It is also that which, I am bold to say, is alone in keeping with the whole spirit of our Lord's teaching. Let us remember the case of the woman who had the issue of blood. She touched our Lord and was healed of the plague. But at the same time a multitude was crowding Him and they gained nothing from the contact. The woman was full of longing and trust, and her touch was the spontaneous expression of the life within her. Had she, instead of touching Him, thrown herself down and besought Him to have mercy, she would have been healed all the same. We learn this from the case of the centurion who obtained healing for his servant while Jesus was not even present with the sufferer.

And the woman was told that it was her faith that had saved her.

So then in the fasting that obtains a blessing it is not the lack of food which is powerful, but the spirit which that lack

of food expresses. If the spirit be there it will find all necessary expression somehow, but the actual form thereof is immaterial. Our Lord could indeed promise a blessing to such as would follow His warning and not turn their fasting into a snare. But He no more urged others to take up that custom than He urged all sick persons to come and touch His garment.

It follows from this also that the fast that earns a blessing must be a spontaneous act, for otherwise it cannot be the expression of an inner spirit. But indeed the same thing is contained in the warning to keep the fast as a private matter between God and one's own spirit. In observing that caution a man will learn a great many things and be brought close to the realities. Among other things he will be greatly helped against playing the hypocrite to himself, against taking up a pose with which to deceive his own heart.

The next passage that we look at is (S. Mk ix 29) where in the Authorised Version we read that our Lord speaking of an unclean spirit which the disciples had failed to cast out, declares that such could be mastered only by "prayer and fasting". Had Jesus really used these words it would have been our part to enquire what He meant by them and we should have had to interpret them from our general knowledge of His methods and doctrines, for there is nothing in the context to enable us to decide between the literal and a figurative sense. But as matter of fact it is now admitted that Jesus did not use the word fasting. If we turn to the Revised Version we shall find that the word has been placed in margin with the note simply that it is found in many ancient authorities. On the whole then it seems quite unnecessary to delay longer on this passage.

It cannot be said to tell us anything at all about our Lord's attitude to ceremonial fasting. S^t Matthew's account of the same incident does not change the matter; indeed in that gospel the whole important verse is to be rejected as an interpolation.

We have now seen what the nature is of our Lord's recorded example and teaching in the matter of fasting. It is wholly in keeping with the fact that He came not to replace the old law by a series of new regulations, but to carry us outside the sphere of mere law altogether and to establish us

in the freedom which the truth gives. For Christianity is essentially, not an authoritative or philosophic system of any sort, but the confrontation of the individual with final reality, that is with God, and with all the spiritual environment supplied by God's creation. The answer of a good conscience to this reality is as S^t Peter tells us that which saves a man. The divine help required by us and given by the Spirit is not to be forgotten. But it is enough for our present purpose to note that law is necessarily superseded, and we must frankly face the fact. Hard as it would have been to reconcile this foundation truth with any ordinance imposing a fast, yet in the presence of any such alleged command it would have been wrong to refuse to examine the case on its own immediate merits. Hence we have examined certain such cases. But we have been landed in no difficulty, for what message soever they may have for us in other ways, there is in them nothing that can bind the conscience of any man to the exercise of deliberate fasting.

Let us now turn to the custom of the Church in the days of the Apostles. In the A. V. we find three places where direct mention is made of fasting as a religious exercise. In one S^t Paul speaks of the right which man and wife have of giving themselves to prayer and fasting.

But here again the word is an interpolation, and while even as amended the passage places no hindrance in the way of a little special self-restraint at times, its main purpose is to deprecate an extravagant asceticism.

We may notice also that in the account which Cornelius gives of himself a mention of fasting has been interpolated, for it is very instructive to note the marked tendency of the copyists to introduce mention of fasting where none is to be found in the original text. Whether they did this deliberately or mechanically, it shows that the truly primitive spirit and practice differed from that of their own day.

The remaining two cases are both connected with S^t Paul's first missionary journey. The company in Antioch that commended him to his enterprise fasted; and this they did not only for the actual commendation but also at the meeting at which the undertaking was agreed upon. During the journey also as S^t Paul and S^t Barnabas bid adieu to the various cities

they commended their new converts to God with prayer and fasting.

It is very remarkable that there is no other mention of fasting in the first age, and above all no mention of it at all in connection with the main stream of Christianity in Jerusalem itself. For while we must not imagine that every case of the use of such a familiar custom would be distinctly recorded for us, yet it cannot be wholly without significance that St Luke who describes the life of the infant Church in Jerusalem by presenting typical occurrences gives no place to fasting. In the Epistles likewise there is absolute silence.

While then we cannot but believe that a very great number of devout Jews carried over the practise with them into the Christian Church, the natural inference is that it held no recognised and official place, and certainly no obligatory force, in Christian observance; and even that it was not so much as recommended to their converts by the Apostles. St Paul, who himself probably fasted on certain occasions already noticed, actually recommends persons to eat if they are hungry before the most solemn service in which a man can engage. The Jews used to fast before the Passover in order to get a good appetite. The Corinthian Christians may have been doing the same before the Agape which enshrined the Holy Eucharist. In this case St Paul's remedy for the consequent scandals is not to perfect the fast by abolishing the Agape, but to avoid temptation by abolishing the fast.

More important still in this regard is the apostolic Council held in Jerusalem to consider the point of Gentile obligation in general. The decision come to was set out in these terms. "It seemed good to the Holy Ghost and to us to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things". Among these necessary things there is a direction to avoid certain methods of killing animals for food, in order not to cause scandal to the Jews; so that we see that the whole question must have been gone into very carefully. But there is no mention of fasting.

Now fasting was not so general among the Gentiles that the Council could omit all mention of it in the confidence that the Gentile Churches would practise it spontaneously. Had they then regarded it as resting on a deep obligation in the reality of things they would have placed it alongside of that decent

morality which they did urge upon all. And had they regarded it as of universal or even of any high expedience it is probable that they would have found some means of conciliating its mention with the freedom from law for which they stood. In any case they are silent on the matter, and are therein in perfect harmony with all the phenomena of apostolic times. There is not one to suggest that fasting is a thing outwith the scope of Christian liberty.

The realities of life are today the same that they were then, and we follow Him Who taught us that the truth shall make us free. We belong to the same Church as he did who, when the liberty of the flock was being threatened, cried to them to stand fast in the liberty wherewith Christ had made them free. And we have in the decrees of the Council in Jerusalem a great charter which no later edict can in principle contradict.

Our liberty is of the very essence of our faith. And just as the truth of very necessity makes us free, not only because of the glorious nature of that which is the truth, but also because he whose foot is on the bedrock of fact and reality is thereby at once quickened to a more living and stronger step than can be given by mere external law, so he who returns to the bondage to the law cuts himself off again from the truth in corresponding degree, whether by obscuring the reality itself or by failing to take the living grip of the free. What S^t Paul said to S^t Peter, when the latter was falling back into Judaism, is true not only of the particular case, but also of all that falls back at any time from reality to law. And were even the true successors of S^t Peter to forget this, then nevertheless let us be found in the following of S^t Paul himself, for great are the issues involved.

In our timid and faithless moments we often, especially those of us who are teachers, are fain to make a merely nominal acknowledgment of these things. We make a formal obeisance to liberty, but attempt to do our real work with all manner of crutches and hedges, as if a man-made crutch were a more powerful reality than the Spirit of God.

But the very best of these inventions, the moment they begin to press upon the spirit as of essential obligation begin also to hinder and not to help. The crutch trips us, the hedge

is strong in keeping us out from God and not in keeping us near. How can it be otherwise? A human spirit, strengthened and humbled by the indwelling Spirit is rising upward to communion with the Father and to the direct perception of His will and guiding hand at every crisis and at every moment of daily life. It finds, not the living touch of God and reality, but binding ordinances that men have formulated. It is effectually frustrated and falls back not perhaps into outer darkness but into the feeble life of sombre twilight. It is no small guilt to teach for doctrines the commandments of men, and to hide away, even with the best of motives, the key of the knowledge of the kingdom of God.

Of what nature then are the Church's appointed seasons of fasting? And how do we stand individually with regard to them?

Let us answer these questions on broad lines. Without minute enquiry into the canons of the Scottish or of any other particular Church let us accept the position that there are duly ordered seasons of ecclesiastical fasting. We can do this the more readily, for as we have already seen these ordered seasons cannot mean anything that is in the nature of a conscience-binding fetter.

Were that to be regarded as possible we should be involved in a question of law, and to the strict letter of the law we should at least in the first instance have recourse.

A canon of any such tendency would not only be *ultra vires* as being clean contrary to the fundamental constitution of the Christian Church, but it would also run counter to the very realities of the Christian scheme of which that constitution is meant to be the expression. The Jerusalem canon on things strangled was carefully explained as a canon of charity shaped by transient circumstances. It made no call on the Christian conscience to regard things strangled as in themselves unfit for food.

On the other hand we must avoid that extreme of pedantry which would see in what our Lord says about the secrecy of a profitable fast an absolute barrier to all formal Church fasts whatever. I do not think indeed that Cardinal Newman is altogether happy in his endeavour to bring past the barrier the obligation on the individual to observe literal fasts, but that

point need not detain us. We have no wish to emulate the Cardinal. But the moment we lay stress on the spiritual realities it is surely indisputable that literalism disappears as much in one particular as in another. An individual even who is observing a literal fast with a spiritual mind does not suffer any loss from the mere fact that somebody else knows that he is fasting.

Almsgiving and fasting are different things, and so the secrecies enjoined upon them may take different sizes and shapes, but they are to be treated on the same principles.

The principle of secrecy then is no bar to the appointment by the Church of seasons of fasting. It simply adds one more word to the already amply sufficient warning that in determining the scope of that appointment we must remember the realities and the freedom of the Christian status. For it is of the spiritual essence of the secret act, whether gift or fast, that it be spontaneous, and spontaneity implies freedom.

Canonical fasts then must be held to consist of the following elements.

(1) The performance by the body corporate of such exercises as may in her correspond spiritually to the fast of an individual.

(2) The offer thereby of opportunities to the individual to take his part in these exercises.

(3) The reminder that in spiritual fasting, whether in literal fasting spiritually undertaken or in other ways, great reward may be found by the individual.

(4) The suggestion of periods to those who desire in any way in their own private practice to observe special seasons of fasting.

The man who neglects these things in their public aspect separates himself from the brotherhood, and according to the wilfulness of his act and to the wisdom of the neglected ordinance, inflicts injury, and suffers loss. I say nothing of disobedience to authority, for while corporate observances are well within the jurisdiction of the living visible Church it is contrary to her spirit to issue peremptory orders in such matters, or in any way to cast stumblingblocks in men's way by adding any arbitrary conditions of membership in the body.

A few words remain to be said about the relation of the individual to the facts and principles dealt with above, that is

about the conditions, the dangers, and the benefits of fasting. As however we are no longer dealing with law, we can use the word in a wider than the literal sense of abstinence from bodily food. But let us also read into it its ecclesiastical connotation that the act of fasting performed, whatsoever it may be, is performed as a religious exercise rather than for the sake of its own immediate and proper result.

We have seen that the fast must be to the utmost possible extent the free action of the individual. And this is necessary not only on the negative side that there may be no curtailment of the Christian's liberty in general, but also that the fast may be really his own in the deep reality required to earn the blessing spoken of by our Lord.

Obedience to proper authority, and even to authority merely believed to be so, is good. But just so far as a fast is a mere act of obedience, just so far it is outside the scope of our Lord's words on the spiritual fast, and must look for its reward among those promised to obedience. Right obedience itself may of course be termed a spiritual fast, but that is another thing which does not touch the justice of what has just been said.

Again a man must not allow into his motives any doubt of the all-embracing sufficiency of God's love and of Christ's sacrifice. There now remains no revengeful punishment for our sins, and anything that breathes this idea is an insult to our Father. And what shall we say of the man who not only fails to see the truth in this matter but even imagines that as in a business transaction he can lessen the total of his penalty by immediate part payment? Similarly no man must imagine that there is any virtue in the mere fact of undergoing pain, or that there is any pleasure to God in seeing us in its grip.

No such faithless thoughts as these were present in S^t Paul's mind when he spoke of filling up that which was lacking in the sufferings of Christ. And we on our part must flee them as first steps in the great apostasy. On the other hand a fast may be a legitimate expression of penitence, a means of helping ourselves to realise the heinousness of sin, and a reminder of what great and real mental distress would bring about as a natural result.

With regard to discipline God certainly sends us enough in the ordinary course of daily life, so that to set to work to supply our own discipline would be about as futile and presumptuous proceeding as it is possible to imagine. The place of fasting from this aspect would be to direct our minds to patience and self-restraint and so to help us to understand and to use aright that abundant experience which was already our own.

Strongly to be condemned is he who by wilful and excessive fasting renders himself less fit for his daily duty dislocating the smooth working of his body; and, setting his nerves on edge, makes it impossible for himself to remain cool under provocation or even decently civil to those round about him. How shall such a man use the prayer not to be led into temptation?

Then again there are the dangers directly referred to by our Lord, and corresponding to each danger the right spirit through which God may send a blessing. If one who fasts were to esteem himself as necessarily more in earnest than another who does not; if he look upon his fast as a more pleasing offering than judgment, mercy, and truth; if in company where fasting was highly regarded he were to parade his own; then without any controversy that man may have his reward, but it is not from his heavenly Father.

There is one practical caution that may be deduced almost from any one of the preceding considerations. The fast that gives the greatest promise of profit, and offers the least risk of perversion is a light fast. A severe fast would almost certainly come to be regarded as of objective merit in opposition to Christ. And as the false reasons for fasting suggest that the efficacy of the fast is proportionate to its severity, so severity of fasting would in all probability lead men to steep themselves in the false reasons.

We have spoken of fasting as an act performed as a religious exercise rather than for its own immediate and proper result. But the deeper we go into realities the less shall we be able to retain even this restriction of meaning for a profitable fast.

Thus when a man refrains from something that is in general quite lawful, but for himself or for his neighbour full

of danger, his act may well be called a profitable fast. Or when he accepts any and all of his life's discipline from the hand of God, and finds in the desert springs of living water, that too well deserves the same name.

We may close with the burning words of Isaiah. Is not this the fast that I have chosen, to loose the bands of wickedness, to undo the heavy burdens, to let the oppressed go free, and that ye break every yoke? Is it not to deal thy bread to the hungry, and that thou bring the poor that are cast out to thy House? When thou seest the naked that thou cover him. And not that thou hide thyself from thine own flesh.

That is, if we desire a religious exercise let us go and do some good in the world even though it cost us something that we shall feel. Let us save our souls by losing them. Let us cease to think selfishly and morbidly about our own spiritual state. Even if we remember it let us make our chief thought and motive the welfare of others. That is indeed a profitable fast.

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