

## From Imposition to Transformation

Our church decided to give up austerity for Lent. I understand and approve that decision as a rejection of the superficiality of so much of what is associated with 'giving up' this that or the other during Lent. Ironically, this Lenten season has become the most austere Lent that most of us have ever known. Many of us are experiencing the austerity of unemployment, of reduction or elimination of income, of distancing from friends and family, of the unavailability of favourite sports, restaurants and cultural activities.

Whatever austerity we may have practiced during normal periods of Lent, they have been the result of our own decision. The social austerity we are now experiencing this Lent has been decided for us. That, of course, makes a big difference, and, in fact, means our present deprivations do not truly belong to Lent because Lent is an experience in which we have to willingly decide to be involved. However, as in the majority of cases, a problem can become an opportunity. We can decide to use our imposed personal deprivations to become a source of willing, personal enrichment.

The word religions use for people deciding to deprive themselves of goods and enjoyments that they and others normally share in, is called 'Fasting'. Fasting is mentioned and approved of throughout the Hebrew and Christian scriptures. Like all religious practices, fasting can become misunderstood, perverted and used as a means of promoting what is bad rather than what is good. The Hebrew prophets, regularly and passionately, denounced those who fasted but remained rapaciously unjust. When Jesus is criticized for not requiring his disciples to fast like those of John the Baptist, Jesus replies that the time of his disciples being with him is a time of celebration not fasting. Martin Luther and John Calvin discouraged fasting because they considered it was promoted as a way for people to prove to God that they were worthy of God's attention.

However, one of the most important events in Jesus' life recorded in the gospels is his fasting in the Judean desert for forty days. It seems this was the time that he became most clear and committed about his role as God's Servant for the salvation of humankind. From this conviction we have all benefited. So fasting can be worthwhile; worthwhile for knowing ourselves, for knowing God, for knowing others and for knowing the world around us. It is a practice and process of disciplined discovery.

We do not deliberately deprive ourselves of habitual enjoyments to prove our worthiness to God, how religious we are, to demonstrate our self control, or simply to lose weight, but to discover why certain habits are important to us and why we miss them when we don't have them. What do these thoughts and feelings of loss tell us about ourselves for good or bad, and how do we want to respond to our awareness of them, either positively or negatively. Often, of course, we 'give up' something that is not very important to us and so we don't discover much. True fasting involves going without an important activity of our life. After fasting we may appreciate it either more or less. Jesus, after all, was criticised later during his ministry for his enjoyment of eating and drinking.

Fasting is a practice that helps us discover more about our relationship with God. Fasting is not easy. Many of us know that when we have only tried giving up chocolate. Its demands can even make our faith seem pointless. However, when we are facing difficulty, that is a time when we should turn to God in prayer and reflect on scripture. Jesus responded to the temptation of faithless self serving through prayer and quoting scripture. Fasting, then, is a time when we can discover God's support and be given new insight about what of the content of our life is in harmony with God's character and purpose and what is not.

Fasting has always been related to helping the needy. True fasting is not to behave like Scrooge, that is, depriving ourselves so that we can accumulate a store of wealth that proves our success, ensures our safety or enables us to gain control over the lives of others. In the Christian scriptures there are three affirmed spiritual practices: prayer, fasting and giving to the poor. In Islam the Ramadan fast involves supporting the poor, both individually and through organised charities. Fasting can involve spending less on oneself and, thereby, feeling, recognising and providing for the needs of others who may never enjoy what we take for granted. By fasting we can develop a greater empathy and solidarity with those in need and consequently share with them our resources of money, materials and personal care. Fasting enables us to discover a relationship with the poor.

Finally, fasting enables us to discover more about the character and organization of the world. Reflecting on our individual way of life; how it relates to God's character and purpose and how the way we live now, and in the future, affects the poor, all three of these ways of discovery result in giving us a clearer vision of the character and organization of the world around us. What attitudes, assertions, activities, what powers, what systems, are present in its functioning. How much do they control us? How much are they responsible for the plight of the poor? How much do they promote or obstruct the development of God's caring community? How much should we support the ways of the world and how much should we resist them? Fasting is not intended to be a means of withdrawing from the world but of strengthening us to witness in it.

We have had a secular fast, imposed on us. Let us not respond only with resignation or discontent. Let us, rather, use these restrictions as an opportunity to make a holy fast. In a holy fast we can discover what is important to us and why, if we will pay attention to our sense of loss. We can discover God's support and receive more insight about the divine presence and purpose, if we will confide our feelings and questions to the Holy One. We can discover our relationship to those who are poor, if we will learn how COVID 19 is impacting them and what we can do to help. We can discover what God is calling us to do as regards witnessing in the world to his peaceful purpose if we will reflect on what this emergency is revealing about globalization and how it needs to be changed to become more caring . Many of us have more time and opportunity to do these things than ever before. It won't be easy but we won't be bored. What better way could there be to spend our distanced time?

Mervyn Russell

Palm Sunday, 2020