

Sunday 19th March 2017. Gospel Reading: Isaiah 58:1-12.

'Fasting, Justice and the Monastery Cat'

I'd like to start by telling you a story about a monastery cat. This story was adapted by John Davidson from an original story by Anthony de Mello and I've added a few of my own embellishments.

The story goes something like this...

Once there was a monastery, now lost in the mists of time, where the monks went about their daily prayers as they had done since ages past. Each day, when they came together for evening prayers, the monastery cat would join the congregation, but he was always getting in the way and distracting the worshippers. So, the abbot requested that the cat be tied up during evening worship and this was obediently done each evening from that time on. After the Abbot died the monks continued to uphold the Abbot's request and the cat was dutifully tied up every evening before vespers. Some while later the cat died too, and the new Abbot gave instructions that another cat should be obtained so that it could be tied up before evening prayers. Centuries later the practice still continued and had become an established tradition in the monastery; indeed, some of the more learned monks even wrote theological treatises on the liturgical significance of having a cat tied up at evening prayers¹.

Now what, I hear you ask, has a story about tying up cats got to with today's reading from the Book of Isaiah? Well, the story of the monastery cat is a reminder to us all that a practical measure can quickly become a custom, a custom can develop into a tradition, a tradition can evolve into a ritual and sometimes, if we're not careful, a

¹ Based on: Davidson, J (1995) *The Gospel of Jesus: In Search of His Original Teachings*. Rockport, MA: Element. pp. 211

ritual can become so deeply disconnected from its original purpose that it serves only our own interests.

This seems to be what happened to the 'House of Jacob', the children of Israel, when they fasted. Their fasting had become disconnected from its primary motivation and was now calculated and acquisitive. Now I'm no expert on Judaism and its customs, practices and traditions but, from what I've read, there would seem to be three main theological justifications for fasting within the Old Testament; firstly fasting as 'repentance for sin', secondly fasting as a means of deepening or 'intensifying prayer' and thirdly, fasting as a humble remembrance that, actually, God 'is the ultimate source and sustainer of life...'². However, there is also a strong thread running through each of these motives that 'fasting (as) a physical discipline...(should) translate into ethical behaviour'; that fasting should see those who fast also acting 'with love and compassion' towards others³ in order to change their circumstances for the better.

Isaiah, along with the other prophets, was a 'champion of the poor'⁴ and he was rebuking those who fasted, with some forcefulness it has to be said, because they had divorced the spiritual practice of fasting from a loving and compassionate response to the suffering of their fellow human beings. They had slipped into a dualistic worldview where their self-absorbed indifference to the oppressed, the hungry, the homeless, the naked, and the afflicted had moved them far from the ethical conduct that would, in fact, have brought them closer to the ultimate source and sustainer of life. Their ritual fasting had become self-serving and egotistic, it had

² Kent Berghuis (2007) at: <https://bible.org/seriespage/chapter-1-fasting-old-testament-and-ancient-judaism-mourning-repentance-and-prayer-hope-g>

³ MJL Staff (No Date) at: <http://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/why-fast/>

⁴ Pleins, J. D (2001) *The Social Visions of the Hebrew Bible*. pp.216

become detached from the ethical behaviour that should have gone hand-in-hand with an authentic and sincere fast. They fasted but continued to 'oppress (their) workers'⁵, they fasted but did not 'loose the bonds of injustice', they fasted but did not 'undo the thongs of the yoke'⁶. They went through the motions of 'bowing (their) heads like a blade of grass in the wind'⁷ hoping their outwardly pious behaviour would impress their companions and their God; but, from God's perspective, they failed to deliver.

Walter Rauschenbusch was an American pastor and theologian and a key figure in the Social Gospel movement that flourished in the United States during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. In his book 'Christianity and the Social Crisis' Rauschenbusch explained that...

"The prophets were the heralds of the fundamental truth that religion and ethics are inseparable, and that ethical conduct is the supreme and sufficient religious act".

Which brings us to the crux of the matter; what is it that God desires as a suitable fast? Well, what God chooses has absolutely nothing whatsoever to do with abstaining from food. God's preferred fast is that we 'seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan (and) plead for the widow'⁸. He wants us to 'loose the bonds of injustice', 'undo the thongs of the yoke', 'let the oppressed go free', 'share (our) bread with the hungry', 'bring the homeless poor into our house(s)', and to cover the naked. Jesus evokes this same directive in the gospel of Matthew where we hear him saying 'I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you

⁵ *Isaiah 58:3 NRSV*

⁶ *Isaiah 58:6 NRSV*

⁷ *Isaiah 58:5 New Living Translation*

⁸ *Isaiah 1:17*

gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me⁹. This directive to us to defend justice and righteousness is a direct reflection of what's called the *missio Dei*, the mission of God, which speaks of God's overflowing love for the world and of God's purpose for the world. Here, God is imploring us to make his mission our mission, to make his desire our desire and to make his work our work.

So, what does this mean for us? How is the *missio Dei* being reflected within our personal and communal lives?

There is much that we currently do as individuals and as a church community; we minister to each other in times of need, support Open Door, the Food Bank, Amnesty, and Fair Trade, raise funds for the church and good causes within the local community via the 'Omnes ad Unum' group, and many are, I'm sure, supporting Bishop Nicholas's Lent appeal for the South Sudan.

Yet, in our community rule, developed during last year's Advent course, we are recommitting ourselves to being welcoming and hospitable, being concerned about social justice, being inclusive, caring for and respecting the natural world and to focusing on the needs of the wider community. We are also committing ourselves to being a community that is informed by scripture, tradition and reason and to being contemplative and rooted in prayer.

Being contemplative and working for social justice are not mutually exclusive, this is not an either/or scenario but a both/and approach where contemplative practice and action for social justice complement each other. We are contemplative in order to

⁹ *Matthew 25:35-36*

rest is God's presence, reflect on God's desire for us as a Christian community grounded in our love for others, and in order to determine how we can act in a way that accords with the *missio Dei*, God's desire for a true fast.

So, as we fast during this Lenten season, as we are abstemious in whatever way has meaning for us, let our abstinence act as a reminder that all creation is interconnected, with God as the ultimate source and sustainer of life. Let us remember the fast that God chooses, and, beyond Lent, let us seek to live our lives everyday with that fast in mind, putting God first and others before ourselves so that our 'light will break forth like the dawn'¹⁰.

And finally, let's not forget the poor old monastery cat who was tied up each day during evening worship. Let's undo the thongs of his yoke lest we become so deeply disconnected from God's mission that we forget that it's also our own.

Amen.

¹⁰ *Isaiah 58:8*