

## Homily for The Seventh Sunday of Ordinary Time (Year A)(23/02/20)

Moses is told by God to sit the people down and to speak to them. So, there they are, attentively waiting to hear God's will for them: 'Be holy', he says. Fast forward a few thousand years and Jesus has sat the people down on the hillside to speak to them. He, too, has God's message for them in his heart, and he too speaks into their anticipation: 'Be perfect'.

Be holy; be perfect. This seems rather a tall order. It is tempting to file it away under 'too difficult' and just carry on as normal. But don't we want a world where everyone is holy – that is, where everyone lives as the person they were created to be fulfilling all their potential and being most truly human? Don't we want a world where everyone is perfect, where we live together in trust and brotherly/sisterly affection, where there is no-one to fear? Of course we do. We want everyone else to be perfect, to treat us as a perfect person would, but the only way to reach such a world is to begin with ourselves. If we want to be perfect, then we are on the way, we have started, and however hard it will be to get there, even with God's help, the first and most important step is the one that sets us on the road.

I thought that it might be useful, on this last Sunday before Lent begins, to look at one of the tools that God has given us to help us work towards holiness. Ash Wednesday is a day of fasting and abstinence. It is a day when we abstain from meat and deny ourselves some food. Fasting is clearly something of great importance in the scriptures. Moses fasts before he receives the tablets of stone with the Law written in them; Elijah fasts before meeting the Lord on Mount Horeb; Ezra calls on the whole nation to fast before they return from exile to the Promised Land; the people of Nineveh fast in response to Jonah's call for repentance. But is fasting something that passed into history with the coming of Christ? Not at all – Lent commemorates his great fast of 40 days in the wilderness before he begins his life of preaching and healing. In the Acts of the Apostles, before Paul and Barnabas are chosen as missionaries the community fasts, as it does each time Paul and Barnabas appoint leaders in a newly founded Church. And there is a story buried away in the Gospel of St Mark about a man who brings his son to the disciples to be healed and they fail. When Jesus casts the demon out the disciples ask why they failed to do it, and he says that this type can only be cast out by prayer and fasting. Might we, perhaps, have been a bit too quick to get out of the habit of fasting, because it seems to us so difficult and so inconvenient? Might it be that its difficulty and its inconvenience are precisely the point, showing us something about ourselves? There is a story that the Coptic Patriarch once said, after observing the decline of fasting in the last century, to a Cardinal of the Western Church 'without fasting there is no Church'.

So, with Ash Wednesday on the horizon, perhaps it is time to rediscover fasting. Ash Wednesday is a fast day for all Catholics. This is important, because often fasting is a communal exercise, something that we all do together. That is how it was for the Ninevites, and for the returning exiles, and for the communities

choosing elders in Apostolic times. Fasting on Ash Wednesday, and Good Friday, is something that we all do together. Other fasts may be private spiritual disciplines, that people do where they choose, but these days are days when we all fast together. We turn to the Lord in sorrow for our failures but in hope for our future, and we do as he himself did, although he had no need of sorrow for sin. We join him in his fast.

But why? Why is fasting a good thing to do? How does it help me to be perfect, to be holy? There are several reasons. One is that it opens our eyes to the reality that many people live. Every day one in nine of the people around the world is hungry. For many of them hunger is the norm, and while we have a choice about whether or not to eat, hunger is forced upon them. When we choose to go without some food (or, in addition, there may be other good things that we choose to deny ourselves) we choose to be brothers and sisters, not strangers, to the hungry. It is no substitute for taking action to help them, but we are driven to that action more urgently when we feel the hunger that is theirs, and when we are shocked into choosing to stand beside them.

Fasting also brings home to us how weakly dependent we are on things: on food, or even on some particular type of food, but on other things, too. Whenever we choose to deny ourselves some good thing, and both body and mind rebel against this, then we see that we have lost our independence and been enslaved. Fasting helps us take a reality check on how much we are in control of our lives. If we cannot go without some simple thing for a short time, cannot resist so simple a temptation, what hope will there be when some really serious temptation comes our way?

What matters most in life? It is the unseen world, the deep realities that cannot be put into words but which, all the same, are our path to happiness and fulfillment. When we try to fast, whether it is from food, or from digital media, or from some other activity, we realize just how much material things have begun to supplant and replace the spiritual and unseen things that give meaning to our lives. We are distracted by physical things so that we forget the things that matter. If I think that I am the centre of the world, then I will do what I like when I choose. By fasting in some way we challenge that, and the internal struggle shows us just how much we have made ourselves, our desires and wills, the touchstone of all value. Perhaps fasting is the only way to cast out the demons of the present age: a materialism that destroys the planet and condemns others to poverty while we are swamped with things we do not need and do not know what to do with; an addiction to digital media that controls our lives and empties our world of silence; a faceless communication that deprives us of the simple skills of conversation, empathy and listening. There is so much that is good about our lives, but also there is so much that conspires to stop us reflecting on the things that matter in the light of eternity. What if, this Ash Wednesday, all together we said 'no' to it all. No to the materialism and the greed, the noise and the barrage of information. What if we chose to fast in some way instead, from food but also from some of the other things that empty our lives of humanity. And if we are thinking 'that sounds too hard' then doesn't that just show us how tight the shackles are that enslave us?