

Fasting

Edward Walker takes another look at this practice.

I am writing this a week before Ash Wednesday, when the Church will assume that we shall all be fasting in some way for the next 40 days.

Perhaps the time has come to have another look at this practice. A good place to begin is the passage in Mark's Gospel in which Jesus was asked, 'Why do John's disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?' (Mark 2: 18) Jesus replies that there can be no question of fasting at a wedding feast, but that 'the days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast in that day.' (v. 20). This verse became a pretext for the practice of fasting in the Church; but in view of the evidence elsewhere in the gospels of 'reading back' post-Resurrection/early Christian interpretations, I cannot help siding with those scholars who see this verse as an example of such reading back, 'in order to justify the practice of observing regular fasts which had already arisen in the church for which St. Mark wrote.' (Alan Richardson, *A Theological Word Book of the Bible*, p.80) Moreover, it seems to run contrary to the saying preserved in Luke's gospel contrasting Jesus' practice with that of John the Baptist: 'John the Baptist has come eating no bread and drinking no wine; and you say, "He has a demon." The Son of Man has come eating and drinking; and you say, "Behold a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!"' (Luke 7: 34-35)

The Forty Day Lenten fast, of course, echoes Jesus' forty-day fast in the Temptation story found in Matthew and Luke. This is a 'Q' passage, and the 'Q' source is generally held to be earlier than Mark; yet Mark's Temptation account is brief in the extreme – 40 days, yes, but no mention of fasting. In the 'Q' source can be found the Sermon on the Mount, but interestingly Luke's version makes no mention of the three injunctions concerning almsgiving, prayer and fasting. 'Fasting' in addition to prayer as the condition of effective healing (Mark 9:29) is

universally held to be a later addition to the text. Nevertheless, Matthew's version of the Sermon includes the apparent assumption that Jesus' disciples *will* fast: 'When you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, that your fasting may not be seen by men but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.' (Matthew 6:17-18) This may be another example of Matthew writing in the context of the early Christian community, but it rings true to the teaching of Jesus, stressing as it does the importance of 'inwardness' in contrast to external formalities. There are two examples in Acts of the community practising fasting – at Antioch, before the commissioning of Paul and Barnabas, and later at the appointment of 'elders'. (Acts 13:2 and 14:23)

According to *A Theological Word Book of the Bible*, 'The NT supplies no evidence that regular fasts were part of the normal life of the Church in the apostolic age. It seems, in view of the bulk of the advice contained in St. Paul's letters to Gentile churches, that exhortations to fastings were not a prominent part of the apostolic teaching.' And yet, according to *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, by the 4th century fasting (Wednesday and Friday fasts are mentioned in *The Didache*, dating from perhaps the early 2nd century) had become an established discipline throughout the Church. It is from that time that the Lenten fast was increased from its original two days to forty. (p.495).

History provides plenty of examples of new spiritual movements which in a fairly short time rigidify. The effervescence which marks their beginnings dissipates; the bubbles no longer rise to the surface of the glass. Is this what happened to Christianity? Other religions had rules about fasting, structures of ministry, buildings – so, once Christianity had ceased to be characterised as 'The Way' (Acts 19: 9 and 23), it too became a 'religion' and developed its own structures.



Jesus tempted by the Devil

If, then, in its earliest days, before ‘The Way’ became ‘The Church’, there were no rules about fasting, there is massive evidence that Jesus stressed the importance – indeed the necessity – of self-denial; not in the sense of going without chocolate or alcohol, but in the way we deal with life. ‘The gate is narrow and the way is hard, that leads to life, and those who find it few.’ (Matthew 7:14; cf. Luke 13:23-4). ‘If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel’s will save it.’ As I have written in my book *Treasure Beneath the Hearth*, ‘The early Christians seem to have been so convinced that these words contained the kernel of Christ’s teaching, and expressed the significance of his death, that... it is the only saying of Jesus recorded in all of the three separate traditions represented in the gospels, Mark, ‘Q’ and John.’ (p. 85-6)

Most of us know only too well, both from our own experience and that of our acquaintances, that (as Jung wrote) ‘it may happen that a Christian who believes all the sacred figures is still undeveloped and unchanged in his inmost soul because he has ‘all God outside’ and does not experience him in the soul.’ (Jung: *Selected Writings*, p. 261)

The religious person ‘unchanged in his inmost soul’ is represented in the gospels (perhaps unfairly) by the Pharisees, and Jesus’ parable of The Pharisee and the Publican specifically includes fasting (twice a week!) among the religious activities which the Pharisee is keen to mention. Loyal churchgoers, of course, are no more exempt from this trait than the Teachers of the Law. Abandon the Lenten fast, then? Ponder anew, certainly. For the question has to be asked whether Jesus would have won through to his own abundant humanity, which plainly included a relaxed attitude to religious formalities (including

fasting), had he not been exposed to the great Jewish myths expressed in the feasts and fasts of his people; though far more importantly, had he not undergone that time in the desert, wrestling with ‘the wild beasts’.

The gentle, wise psychiatrist and psycho-therapist Robin Skynner (in an essay he contributed to a book about The Alexander Technique) had this to say: ‘All growth and development takes place by discontinuous steps, in which periods of temporary disintegration are followed by reintegration at a new and higher level... Though more readily observable in the rapid changes occurring in the young, this law that new and improved patterns can only arise from the temporary breakdown and apparent loss of the pre-existing ones probably applies to any form of growth and development, no matter at what age this occurs.’ Further, Skynner concludes, ‘the more fundamental the impending change, the more it must feel to us like a threatened dissolution and loss of everything that really matters in us, everything we most essentially feel we *are*.’ (Robin Skynner: ‘The Process of Growth’. Essay in *More Talk of Alexander*, ed. W. Barlow., p. 135)

Abstinence from chocolate or gin may have its place; but far more important is being prepared to wrestle with ‘the wild beasts’ of ‘threatened dissolution’.

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Edward Walker’s most recent book is *Treasure Beneath the Hearth* (Christian Alternative, Winchester 2015), reviewed by David Lambourn in *Sofia* 117.

Span

*‘I’m not coming to the Revolution
unless there’s dancing’ –*

ROSA LUXEMBOURG

A notable mark,
the biblical span
worth celebrating,
so let’s dance, it’s
not downhill all the way
unless life is lived
on a sledge, headlong
into the unknown,
the ice shooting you
into your personal
Narnia, a world of
challenges where you
can stay forever young
and always beautiful
as long as you believe
the Ice Queen will not
hold the world frozen
without resistance.
As ever, Blake was right,
Energy is eternal delight,
the Ice Queen & her lovers
of darkness know this,
they are powerless in
the face of the one true
power, which shines out
and shines on, from the
heart, reaching out in
fellowship, person to
person, love is the oil
in the lamp, shine on.

Brian Docherty

This poem and ‘Meadow Cranesbill’ on page 17 are reprinted by kind permission of the author from *In My Dreams, Again* (Penniless Press 2017).

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