

The disciples of John the Baptist questioned Jesus about the lack of fasting of his own disciples. We recall that John the Baptist was very ascetic ... eating wild locusts and honey. We can imagine that John's disciples were taught to be very rigorous in fasting and in self-denial.

As Catholics, we are called to fast during the 40 days of Lent. If we count the days from Ash Wednesday to Easter, we come up with a total of 47 days. The Sundays during Lent are not days of fasting. This makes sense as Jesus teaches: "The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast" (Mt 9:15). Each Sunday of the year, we celebrate the Paschal (Easter) Mystery of the death and resurrection of Jesus. Each Sunday is like a mini-Easter in which we are called to receive the Body and Blood, Soul and Divinity of our Risen Savior. As we encounter Jesus in Word and Sacrament, we are challenged to repent and believe in the gospel.

Our first reading puts this in perspective. "Why do we fast, and you do not see it? afflict ourselves, and you take no note of it?" (Isa 58:3a). Jesus answered this complaint with our Gospel reading from Ash Wednesday: "Take care not to perform righteous deeds in order that people may see them; otherwise, you will have no recompense from your heavenly Father" (Mt 6:1).

Fasting is meant to draw us closer to God but this requires a willing spirit. Isaiah points this out in noting, "See, you fast only to quarrel and fight and to strike with a wicked fist! Do not fast as you do today to make your voice heard on high!" We should be careful as we fast, for we too can fall into the same difficulties. When we are used to drinking coffee, fasting from caffeine can make us irritable. And our bodies can get used to eating at a particular time of day. If we alter that routine, we can be irritable as well.

We are not called to fast to draw attention to ourselves or to please ourselves. No, we are challenged to please the Lord. The Prophet Isaiah explains: "This, rather, is the fasting that I wish: releasing those bound unjustly, untying the thongs of the yoke; setting free the oppressed, breaking every yoke" (58:6).

I once worked with a priest in inner city Portland who told me of the inhumane way prisoners were released from the city jail. Late at night, when the downtown area was dark and deserted, they released people in the chill of the night. Oftentimes the people were not dressed for this. He spoke to the authorities and challenged them to be more humane. "If you don't stop this, I will invite the press to see the way you unjustly treat these people." They got the message and chose a better hour of the day and a more humane way of returning people to society.

When we fast, we might give up some favorite food or drink. Isaiah challenges us to share our bread with the hungry and bring the homeless into our home (58:7). Darrin Mann of Fairpark, Utah has invited the homeless to setup tents in his front yard. He opens his home so they can use the bathroom and he has a set of rules that help restore dignity to the homeless. Drug use and violent behavior are unacceptable. The 15 or so people who camp out on his front lawn must keep the area clean and also help with a community garden. Although it is not the planting season, they work to prepare the ground for the coming season. Darrin has invited neighbors to cook food for the homeless and to donate clothing. He recognizes the problem of the homeless is community wide and he is seeking to involve the entire community in the solution.¹ This indeed is fasting that pleases the Lord.

¹ cnn.com/2021/02/06/us/homeless-utah-front-yard-trnd/index.html