**Jesus questioned about fasting** 23/4/23 dkm

Read: Isaiah 58, Mark 2:1-22

Text: Mark 2:18-22

Psalms: 100old, 30:1-5 &11-12, 138:1-5, 117

Fasting involves going without food, not because you have no food but for religious reasons or as a sign of mourning, or maybe health reasons. In the Bible we read of David fasting as part of mourning for Saul and Jonathan, and later for Abner (2Sam 1:12, 2:35). David also fasted when praying for his sick son; strangely he got up and ate when his son died (2Sam 12:17). After the Exile, special fast days were declared, days of fasting and prayer (Ezra 8:21); we read of Esther calling for fasting during the Exile (Esther 4:16). In the OT the only fast commanded was on the Day of Atonement. In Leviticus 16:29 ‘affliction of souls’ is understood to mean fasting, and in Acts 27:9 Luke refers to the Day of Atonement as ‘the Fast’.

In NT times pious Jews like the Pharisees made fasting a part of their religious ritual; they fasted twice a week (Luke 18:12). Jesus condemned the Pharisees, not for their fasting as such but for their fasting as a show of their piety (Mat 6:16). The disciples of Jesus did not fast when he was with them but they did after Pentecost, as Jesus said they would (2:20, Acts 13:3); but this was not as a ritual or sacrament belonging to the church.

Fasting is a ritual practiced in the Roman Catholic Church. It is done as an act of penance, especially during the season of Lent. It is said that, ‘Fasting helps us to master our cravings rather than being driven by them’. Is this an admission that they are driven by cravings after Lent? Their fasting may mean refraining from solid food for a day or just having one meal a day. In Islam, fasting for a month is a very important ritual; they would say much the same thing as Roman Catholics about mastering their cravings during this month, but is skipping the midday meal such a hardship? Not drinking anything is of course, a hardship, and dangerous during extremely hot days in India. Some believers fast regularly but they do so voluntarily and quietly because fasting is not commanded in the Bible.

Mark records this question about fasting in the same context as Matthew and Luke, namely the context of rising opposition towards Jesus from the scribes and Pharisees. The religious leaders had already accused Jesus of blasphemy, and condemned him for eating with tax collectors and sinners. The question about his disciples not fasting is not a direct criticism, but in the context appears as such. Actually Matthew has the disciples of John asking this question while Mark, again in the context, points to the scribes and Pharisees (Mat 9:14). As we might expect, Jesus gives a profound answer to the question, and goes on to teach about the new dispensation he was bringing in.

**1. Fasting**

Jesus may have been leaving the feast hosted by Matthew when he was asked a question about fasting. His disciples were doing more feasting than fasting. The disciples of John, and of the Pharisees, fasted regularly but the disciples of Jesus not at all; this is not to say they were fasting for the same reasons. So ‘they’ came to Jesus and asked him why. Matthew says it was the disciples of John that came but Mark simply says, ‘they came’, which could mean both groups, or grammatically point back to the scribes and Pharisees of verse 16.

John the Baptist came into Judea preaching a baptism of repentance. He was the last of the OT prophets; he was also an ascetic who dressed in a camel’s hair coat, and ate locusts and wild honey (1:6). Now we learn that he fasted, or his disciples at least fasted. John had his own disciples, but when Jesus came along he pointed them to ‘the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world’ (John 1:29). Some of these disciples remained loyal to John, however, even after he was put in prison. These disciples may have been fasting and praying in earnest because John was in prison. They failed to note something else that John said about Jesus; John spoke of Jesus being the bridegroom, and of the joy that he felt in being the friend of the bridegroom (John 3:29). Jesus knew and affirmed what John had spoken.

**2. Bridegroom**

Why do people fast? Why do they afflict themselves in this way? Fasting may be an expression of grief. People fast at funerals not at weddings. People fast and pray in times of difficulty or suffering. Some think that fasting is a way of getting God’s attention, or even of twisting his arm, as it were. I knew a man who prayed for a long time and then decided to fast and pray when his prayer was not answered. He thought fasting would make his prayer more powerful.

Isaiah condemned fasting that was aimed at twisting God’s arm. The people said, ‘Why have we have fasted but you (God) take no notice?’ (Isa 58:3). The Pharisees liked to make a show of fasting. They were proud that they fasted. But Jesus was not impressed. Fasting should be an expression of humility, not pride.

Jesus disciples did not fast- they did pray, of course. Why didn’t they fast? Because the bridegroom was with them! They were feasting and rejoicing because the long awaited bridegroom had come. ‘We have found the Messiah (Christ)’ Andrew exclaimed to his brother, Simon Peter (John 1:41). Matthew was so excited when Jesus called him that he called his friends to come and feast with Jesus.

In the OT the Lord is spoken of as the husband of his people Israel (Jer 31:32). Through the prophet Hosea, the Lord said, ‘I will betroth you to me forever’ (Hos 2:19). Isaiah writes, ‘For your maker is your husband’, and, ‘As the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you’ (Isa 54:5, 62:5). Jeremiah writes, ‘I was a husband to them says the Lord’. Here were a people who were betrothed to the Lord. Now their beloved had come. The bridegroom had come. This was no time for sorrow or grief. This was a time to rejoice.

The Jews, and others, have reason to fast because they live in unbelief. They do not know that God has sent his only begotten Son into this world to take away our sin. They do not believe that, ‘The Word became flesh and dwelt among us’, and that, ‘we have seen his glory, the glory of the only begotten of the Father’ (John 1:14). They have no reason to rejoice, but you who believe have every reason to rejoice. You know that the Saviour of the world has come and has taken away your sin through his death and resurrection.

‘But the days will come’ said Jesus, ‘when the bridegroom will be taken away’ (2:20). The word translated ‘taken away’ carries the idea of violence. Here is the first mention of Jesus’ death, even though it may not be obvious. The disciples did become very sorrowful and full of grief when Jesus was crucified and his body placed in the tomb.

But then came the news that he was risen from the dead. He ascended into heaven, but not before promising the Holy Spirit, the counsellor and the comforter. Jesus did not leave them alone. We have no need to mourn separation from Christ because he is with us by his Spirit. We mourn because of our sin (James 4:9), but when we turn to Jesus and confess our sin we are forgiven. We rejoice in the forgiveness of our sin, and in God’s presence with us by his Spirit. We rejoice as we look forward to the ‘marriage supper of the Lamb’, the great wedding banquet in heaven when we who believe in Jesus and follow him will sit down at the table of the Lord (Rev 19:7).

We must ‘reject fasting as a religiously meritorious ceremony bearing a compulsory ceremonial character’. We must not think that by fasting, by cutting ourselves, or by waving our arms and screaming, we can force God’s hand in any way. God looks upon the heart. He looks for evidence of a humble and contrite heart, and for obedience to his commands. When you pray, go to a place where you can quietly communicate with God. If fasting assists you in prayer, by all means fast and pray- but do so with humility and not with pride.

**3. New dispensation**

With two simple illustrations or parables Jesus pointed out that he was not to be compared to teachers like the Pharisees or even the prophet John. Jesus was ushering in a whole new dispensation or order with regard to God and mankind. Did he not announce, ‘The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand (1:15)? ‘Jesus was not simply patching up Judaism. He is teaching something radically new. If the attempt is made to constrict this within the old wineskins of Judaism (e.g. by imposing fasting) the result will be disastrous’. The ceremonial law and the whole structure of Jewish worship was being fulfilled in Jesus Christ.

When the bridegroom comes he takes his bride away from her home to start a new life with her. When a newly married couple live in the family home it can be disastrous! The Bible says, ‘Leave your father and your mother and cleave to your wife’. Disciples of Jesus must leave their old ways, including the old ways of Judaism. This did not mean throwing out the law; it meant the law was fulfilled in Jesus (Mat 5:17). The disciples were slowly coming to this realisation. The Pharisees, on the other hand, saw Jesus as a threat to their religion and their way of life.

Jesus cannot be an addition to your old ways or old religion. Some Hindus take a cross or other icon and add it to the collection of gods they worship. Some Christians start worshipping Jesus but do not leave their old ways. This is can be a tendency in some tribal religions- as with polygamy in Africa. It was interesting read of the Tongan king’s response regarding his wives after he believed in Jesus Christ. Some Christians take Jesus but continue in their old way of thinking and old way of life even in our western society. The Bible says, ‘If anyone is in Christ he is a new creation; the old had gone and the new has come’ (2Cor 5:17). There must be a radical change in our lives when we enter the kingdom of God.

Jesus was aware of the pull of the past. He was aware of our reluctance to change. ‘The old is good’ we say of wine and of many things (Luke 5:39). Have you seen people sliding back into old ways after setting out on the new path as a believer in Jesus? It is tragic is it not? It is disastrous. It is as if they had stitched new or unshrunk cloth onto an old garment. The old garment is torn and broken just like Judaism was and is, and just like all man-made religions are. If you patch this old garment with a piece of new cloth and put it in the wash what will happen? The new cloth will shrink, tearing the old garment even further. Similarly, pouring new wine into old, dry and hard wineskins will lead to disaster. The old inflexible wineskins will soon burst when the wine ferments and the pressure builds up. New wineskins made from soft animal hide must be used for new wine. Such wineskins are flexible and elastic enough to withstand the pressure.

We must be on the alert and not go back to the old way of works salvation. Is this not what lies behind much of the fasting that we see in the world, and even in the church? People may be impressed by those who make a big thing of fasting, but Jesus wasn’t. It is by grace you are saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God (Eph 2:8).

We must pray and pray always. By all means fast and pray, but remember the Lord hears your prayers because of Jesus not because of your works or even your sincerity. You are praying to the sovereign Lord of the universe who knows all things and who has a perfect plan and purpose for you (Rom 12:2). You who believe are his child and he knows what is best for you. You do not have to twist his arm, as it were, to get Him to do good things for you.

What God wants is for you to love him with all your heart, all your soul, and all your mind. What he wants is for you to love your neighbour as yourself. Fasting that God wants is for you to act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God (Isa 58:6f, Micah 6:8).