**7pm Eucharist Ash Wednesday 14 February 2024 – Revd Ceri Payne**

**Is 58:1-12 and Matt 6:1-6, 16-21 – A heart *for* God and *of* God as motivation for, and outcome of, giving, praying and fasting**

Since Lent is the time that Christians traditionally fast, today (Ash Wednesday) is a good day to ask the question “Should Christians fast?”

One view is yes, because Jesus says *“when you fast…”*, not *“if you fast…”*. Today’s gospel reading comes from the Sermon on the Mount, when Jesus was setting out his blueprint for the people who wanted to know how to be his disciples. So, it is said, Jesus assumes that his followers will fast but wants to share with them why and how they should do so.

On the other hand, some might say no to the question “Should Christians fast?”

They might say that it is because Jesus says *“when you fast…”*, that there should be no implied assumption that his followers will necessarily fast, or that there’s any obligation to fast.

They might point out that at this time and place in his ministry, Jesus was almost certainly addressing Jews and not Gentiles.

His Jewish listeners would have been accustomed to fasting and expecting to continue doing so. But as the early followers of Jesus began to debate how Jews and Gentiles were to be integrated as one church, there would be many religious practices and customs that non-Jewish Christians would not be required to follow, such as being circumcised and obeying the food laws.

Perhaps the same would be true of fasting?

However, the early Christians certainly did fast and pray, especially when seeking God’s will. In Acts chapter 13, it is while various teachers in the church are worshipping and fasting that they discern the Holy Spirit directing them to select and send Barnabas and Paul to a preaching and teaching ministry.

And then in the next chapter, it is with prayer and fasting that Paul and Barnabas themselves entrust others to do the work of the church.

But maybe that was because first *Jewish* Christians came from a tradition of praying and fasting as a familiar method of seeking the heart of God for his people?

In any event, in the ensuing centuries many Christians have practised fasting and found that it can be a way of seeking God in prayer, a reminder that man cannot live by bread alone, and a way to focus not on the gifts of God – on all that he gives us for our pleasure - but on God himself.

**So, if Christians do fast…how are they to do it?**

Our gospel reading emphasises the need to check the motivation for fasting, and equally to do this when giving alms, or when praying. Are you doing this for the impact that it will have on how other people think of you?

When what we do has the potential to raise the profile of a good cause, and we want to encourage others to follow our example and to commit to supporting that good cause, this is a tricky thing to negotiate.

Let’s be clear here: it is not wrong **to be seen** giving, or praying, or fasting. But it is wrong to give, or to pray, or to fast, ***in order to be seen*** doing so by other people.

Even if you are not fasting in order to impress other people, it is still helpful to ask yourself: is this actually something you are doing for yourself?

As John Stott said of Christian giving, but it is equally applicable to fasting: *“it is to be marked by self-sacrifice and self-forgetting, but not by self-congratulation”*.

Fasting is to be done humbly, with a heart that is seeking after God, and is not directed to setting records.

Fasting is not a good thing if it encourages us to be more preoccupied with ourselves - self-obsessed, even – rather than focussing our heart upon God.

So, we should ask ourselves, is this for God? Is it deepening my relationship with God? God doesn’t *need* anything that we might want to offer up to him, but what we offer up to him in love can deepen our relationship with him.

**We should not be looking to other people, or even to ourselves, but to God. When we fast, we must have a heart for God.**

And we must give, pray, and fast with the mindset of **seeking the heart of God**. The prophet Isaiah told the Israelites ***“you serve your own interest on your fast-day”***; urging them to listen to God saying ***“is such the fast that I choose? A day to humble oneself?”***

Isaiah tells the people of Israel that the fast day acceptable to the Lord – the fast that he would choose – is the fast ***“to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke, to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house…”***.

And Isaiah warns that the Lord will answer the Israelites only,

***“if you remove the yoke from among you, the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil, if you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted”***.

Fasting should make a difference, not just to how you feel about God, by drawing you closer to him and deepening your relationship to him. Fasting should change how you live for God: living out in words and deeds how the Holy Spirit is transforming you into the likeness of Christ. Enabling you to have the heart of God. So that your fasting ultimately does have an impact upon the homeless and the hungry, and on the needy and the neglected.

Again and again, since I’ve been at GSM, I’ve become aware of individual acts of kindness, of selfless good deeds being done for others. And it has rarely, if ever, been the doer of the good deed who’s told me about it.

The habits of holiness, as with anything else practised regularly and whole-heartedly, become a part of us and an intrinsic part of who we are. And as we do the things that please our Father, for the sake of his son Jesus, we are being trained to have the heart and mind of the Father: thinking as he does, and loving as he does.

Those who fast and pray, and are seeking to be aligned with God’s heart, and who then act in accordance with God’s heart, will find blessing with God.

As we heard in our reading from Isaiah, the follow-up to the fast that follow’s God’s heart is to experience the transformation that can only be brought about by the Holy Spirit.

To know the Lord as guide and provider.

To know the Lord as the one who refreshes and the one who raises up.

To know him as the one who restores and repairs the bereft and the broken.

**Amen**.