

Commentary on the Gospel for Fri, Feb 12th 2016

Fasting is honored in most religious traditions for expressing humility, hope, and love of God. During the time of Christ, many Jews fasted authentically, out of personal devotion. This was the case with the disciples of John the Baptist and many good Pharisees. But others among the Pharisees fasted “twice-a-week” in a self-sufficient effort to earn justification as defined by laws derived from the Torah and Talmud. This turned into a formalism the prophets had already denounced, especially when done “in order to be seen” which made it a sign of self-centered pride.

Jesus did not prescribe anything like “twice-a-week” fast for his disciples. He certainly did not want to do away with the law: He came to fulfill it! And the attitude of Jesus toward fasting was antithetical to the attitude of those Pharisees who saw it as self-justifying and who used it to impress others.

In today’s Gospel, Jesus is asked why his own disciples did not fast while the disciples of John the Baptist and the Pharisees did. His answer revealed an essential aspect of His identity and destiny as well as a profound reason for fasting by those following Him. He gave them a parable likening Himself to a bridegroom suddenly separated from his bride:

Can the wedding guests mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them? The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast. Jesus is pointing out that, for now, He and His companions were living in a time of joy, so that fasting would be inappropriate, in fact incongruous: this was a time when the joy of salvation was breaking into the world and their lives. The Lord and His companions were joyful because He, the Bridegroom, was inaugurating the very Kingdom of joy! How could the disciples fast while the wedding feast is in progress? How could they mourn while their Master is performing works of mercy and speaking truths pointing the way to eternal life?

But Jesus’s two-line parable anticipates His passion and death. The wedding feast will be aborted: the disciples will suffer the loss of their Lord. In the days to come, the Christian communities founded by the disciples will elevate the Jewish tradition of doing without water and food in order to remind them of this loss. But these apostolic communities, with whom even now we are one in the Mystical Body and Communion of Saints, will endure this separation from Our Lord until the Parousia. Our fasting, especially during Lent, expresses the ache of our longing for the return He has promised.

Scripture scholar Dennis Hamm, S.J., writes: “[God] is calling us now to a new life in the Spirit which, without removing the realities of cross carrying and Good Friday suffering, is still meant to be mainly life in a community of faith characterized by hope and joy.”

Come, and come quickly

Come, spotless Bridegroom

Come, Lord,

Come fill our thirst

Come, gift your bride with peace

Come and conclude your covenant

Come, declare your earthly kingdom

Come, show your power over death

Even so,

Lord Jesus, come

A poem by Reason A. Poteet

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