

19. February 2021

**“A fast that pleases the Lord”**

*Isa 58:1-9*

*Shout for all you are worth, do not hold back, raise your voice like a trumpet. To my people proclaim their rebellious acts, to the House of Jacob, their sins. They seek for me day after day, they long to know my ways, like a nation that has acted uprightly and not forsaken the law of its God. They ask me for laws that are upright, they long to be near God: 'Why have we fasted, if you do not see, why mortify ourselves if you never notice?' Look, you seek your own pleasure on your fastdays and you exploit all your workmen; look, the only purpose of your fasting is to quarrel and squabble and strike viciously with your fist. Fasting like yours today will never make your voice heard on high. Is that the sort of fast that pleases me, a day when a person inflicts pain on himself? Hanging your head like a reed, spreading out sackcloth and ashes? Is that what you call fasting, a day acceptable to Yahweh? Is not this the sort of fast that pleases me: to break unjust fetters, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break all yokes? Is it not sharing your food with the hungry, and sheltering the homeless poor; if you see someone lacking clothes, to clothe him, and not to turn away from your own kin? Then your light will blaze out like the dawn and your wound be quickly healed over. Saving justice will go ahead of you and Yahweh's glory come behind you. Then you will cry for help and Yahweh will answer; you will call and he will say, 'I am here.' If you do away with the yoke, the clenched fist and malicious words.*

Why is the sacrifice of fasting not accepted by the Lord? Why does the Lord not accept the mortification? That is the question of this text!

At the same time, we also get the answer as to how the Lord wants to see fasting.

Penitential exercises like fasting will only be fruitful if they are embedded in a general conversion, i.e. in the improvement of life. They cannot be detached from this and stand on their own, then they would only be exercises without a heart, without the person in their midst being addressed. That is why the text speaks so clearly and the prophet raises his voice like a trumpet on behalf of the Lord. The people addressed want to be close to God, they want to know his ways, but these remain closed to them.

One cannot simply dispose of God, as one tries to do in magic or in some other practices. Although we can even dispose of God's heart through love and he communicates himself to us, even calling us friends (*cf. Jn 15:15*), there are conditions for this on our part.

In the above text, the Jews addressed demand this friendship and guidance from God, but they do not receive it. Their fasting and penitential exercises are not performed in the right spirit. They believe they have a right to God's guidance through these exercises, but the Lord does not answer, or rather he gives them a clear answer through the prophet Isaiah.

God points out to them that although they are doing exercises of repentance, they are otherwise transgressing against the commandments. Their whole behaviour is not directed towards living pleasing to God, but they give in to their evil inclinations. The sacrifice of fasting is thus separated from their general conduct of life.

Therefore, the Lord calls them back into the right basic order of a life pleasing to God and names a number of good works that are agreeable to Him! Among them are those works which we call the works of mercy. These are what matter to the Lord, for they are an authentic expression of a God-pleasing life. As long as one does not strive to put the Lord's instructions into practice, one cannot truly reach God and live in that friendship which He offers us.

So the text becomes a directive for us: works of repentance yes, fasting yes! They can give great dynamism, but they must be embedded in the general striving for holiness. Then they unfold their inner mission and are pleasing to the Lord. Thus, in His love, He looks upon the one who labours and the latter may rely on the words of the Prophet: *“Then your light will blaze out like the dawn and your wound be quickly healed over.”*

With good works the true beauty of the soul shines forth and the believer behaves like the Lord Himself: as God directs us so He acts. In this way - what a beautiful word - our wounds also heal, those that were caused by sin in the soul, because love heals.

Especially at the beginning of Lent, we are reminded of the works of mercy, both corporal and spiritual. They are the concrete implementation of a life pleasing to God, the concretisation of love. It must not remain that we only do all this

theoretically, but the following of Christ demands concrete deeds. That would be a good resolution at the beginning of Lent!