

4. March 2022

## Fasting as preparation

**Mt 9:14-15**

*Then John's disciples came to him and said, 'Why is it that we and the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not?' Jesus replied, 'Surely the bridegroom's attendants cannot mourn as long as the bridegroom is still with them? But the time will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast.'*

A wedding and fasting are two things that definitely do not go together!

A wedding is a time of joy and celebration. So it is in our earthly life, and the Lord takes it as a metaphor to explain to us that His presence among the disciples is a cause for celebration.

Fasting, besides being a sacrifice, an expression of mourning, a form of asceticism, a reinforcement for spiritual combat, among others, is an important preparation for a special occasion. Fasting reminds us that we live in expectation of something that has not yet come, that has not yet been consummated.

And indeed, this was the reality in the times before the birth of Jesus. John the Baptist and his disciples were awaiting the coming of the Messiah. They knew that what they were living was not yet the fullness and that everything was directed towards a great goal. In a sense, this could be said about the whole time of the Old Covenant, that it had not yet come to fullness; something was missing. In that sense, St. Paul speaks of the Law as a teacher: *"So the Law was serving as a slave to look after us, to lead us to Christ, so that we could be justified by faith. But now that faith has come we are no longer under a slave looking after us."* (Gal 3:24-25)

But then for Jesus' disciples the time of waiting was over; the bridegroom had already come. He is in their midst and leads them to the marriage of the Lamb. It is a time of joy: the disciples can live in communion with him, with the living God, who dwells in the midst of men.

However, in today's Gospel the Lord gives us to understand that also for his disciples there will come a time of fasting, when the bridegroom will be taken away from them. And so fasting was inserted into the life of the Church!

Lent, this long and special time of fasting that we have begun, with the sign of the cross of ashes on our heads, is the preparation for the supreme Feast of the Church: the Resurrection of Christ.

On that day the preparatory fasting comes to an end. When Christians exclaim: "The Lord is risen!" they no longer think of the long period of fasting, but the joy of the Resurrection triumphs over everything. This can be experienced, for example, in Jerusalem, where there are many Eastern Christians, who can be very expressive in their joy.

But let us not get ahead of ourselves... We are just taking the first steps in this stage of fasting. We hear about the Lord's journey with his disciples, about his teachings and his miracles. We hear also the exhortation to deep conversion. We must understand what fasting is pleasing in the sight of God.

Sacred Scripture gives us abundant nourishment to prepare us for the great Event of our faith, leading us to a deeper encounter with God in the Season of Lent and leading our souls towards Easter grace.

We can, then, turn fasting into active waiting, a time to adorn our soul for the coming of the Bridegroom, to go into our "inner house" and remove from it everything that might displease the heavenly Guest. Let us adorn ourselves with the virtues, to please and welcome Him! We know well how the Lord wants to meet us when He comes!

It is also good to restrain certain tastes of our senses during the Lenten Season. If we always have everything we desire and are never willing to make a sacrifice, it will be more difficult for us to understand life as a gift of God's goodness.

The beautiful preface we hear in the Holy Masses of Lent tells us,  
*"You ask us to express our thanks by self-denial.  
We are to master our sinfulness and conquer our pride.  
We are to show to those in need Your goodness to ourselves."*

In any case, what the Lord most desires is that we work on our heart, because good works - which are the right fast in God's eyes - spring from a purified heart. If our heart is transformed, becoming like that of Jesus and Mary, the Holy Spirit will have free access, so that God's grace can penetrate us ever more deeply.

Let us embark on this Lenten journey with courage, for the preparation is part of the feast. Our whole life is a preparation for eternity: every day, every hour... Through faith, eternity is already emerging in our earthly life. If we follow this line, so many areas of our life will be marked by God. We will be able to leave behind things that are not so important; we will learn to recognise what is essential and we will seek God's closeness more and more, until the day comes when we will be able to contemplate Him face to face.

A similar thing happens with the Season of Lent. The more consciously we live it in the Lord, the more Easter joy will already penetrate our hearts. And let us not forget that the Lord loves what we do in secret (cf. Mt 6:4.6.18), and that He "*loves a cheerful giver*" (2 Cor 9:7)!