

18. January 2021

“The value of fasting”

*Mk 2:18-22*

*John's disciples and the Pharisees were keeping a fast, when some people came to him and said to him, 'Why is it that John's disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not?' Jesus replied, 'Surely the bridegroom's attendants cannot fast while the bridegroom is still with them? As long as they have the bridegroom with them, they cannot fast. But the time will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then, on that day, they will fast. No one sews a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old cloak; otherwise, the patch pulls away from it, the new from the old, and the tear gets worse. And nobody puts new wine into old wineskins; otherwise, the wine will burst the skins, and the wine is lost and the skins too. No! New wine into fresh skins!'*

It was not easy for the Pharisees to understand Jesus' behaviour and his answers. Fasting was considered an important religious practice and now they saw that Jesus' disciples neither washed their hands before eating nor did they fast. They must have been even more surprised by the reference to the bridegroom. We cannot assume that Jesus was simply puzzling the Pharisees! Some things were difficult to understand even for the disciples, but later he explained it to them when they were alone!

What access would there have been for the Pharisees, at least for those who had not yet closed their hearts to Jesus, to understand him better!

It is probably the access we can all have towards God, even if we do not understand the concrete situation. A step of trust is necessary, to ask God to give us the light we need or simply the strength to go through a dark, unknown situation and wait until it is illuminated for us. Even the Pharisees would certainly have found access to the Lord through such an attitude, because he did not close the way to him for them!

As for fasting, unfortunately it has been almost completely lost in our Church, except for those who do it voluntarily! Jesus has by no means abolished this important practice, but he has created a different situation with his coming. Now we are no longer waiting for the coming of the Messiah, but for his return. The time in between is the time of the Church fulfilling her mission to proclaim to

humanity that the Bridegroom has come to lead his Bride home - a Bride he wants to make spotless beforehand, a Bride who has fallen among the robbers!

In his incarnation, the Lord has united himself with our human nature, if you like you can say: he, the heavenly Bridegroom, has united himself indissolubly with us through love, it is the fulfilment of the promises of the Old Covenant.

As long as the Lord was on earth, the time of joy was already the beginning of fulfilment and therefore it was not the time of fasting, because the Bridegroom was there!

Fasting now means, as the Lord tells us, to take part in the suffering of the Lord, we fast in remembrance of him, of his death! That is why Friday in particular is such a fasting day! So a new aspect of fasting is added!

But this does not mean that the other important aspects of fasting are abolished. Fasting remains an ascetic exercise that helps to control our senses, not to have everything at our disposal at all times, to appreciate the value of food more. Fasting also retains the sense of a sacrifice, of voluntarily renouncing something and offering it to the Lord as an act of repentance, possibly as an act of reparation!

Obviously there is also a strong exorcistic moment in fasting. Jesus points out that some kinds of demons can only be cast out through fasting and prayer (*cf. Mt 17:21*). In addition, when fasting is done in a spiritual sense, our hearts can open more easily to the poor.

Fasting is also meaningful as a special preparation for an important ministry! We see the example of Jesus himself: Before his public appearance he retires to the desert to fast (*cf. Lk 4:2*).

Sometimes bishops also call for fasting in special situations, for example to promote a peace process, to ask God to save us from an impending disaster.

So we see that the meaning of fasting is not over with the coming of Jesus, but is deepened by him!

It is true: with Jesus comes the new wine (*cf. Lk 5:37-38*). He is not only a prophet who proclaims God, but God Himself. So there is a need for a New Way! The nations do not have to become Jews in order to enter into the covenant of God. They are not called to live in the manner of the Jews, as the New Testament

testifies (*cf. e.g. Acts 15:6-20*), but have been given direct access to God through the Son of God! They no longer need the temple in Jerusalem to worship God, they can worship him in spirit and in truth (*cf. Jn 4:21-23*).

And this relationship with Jesus is expressed in ever newer forms, so the wine is looking for new wineskins! Let us think, for example, of the variety of religious communities and spiritual movements and of all that the Christian faith has given us in sacred manifestations: from architecture to sacred art and music.

But also in ourselves, this wine is always looking for new wineskins. If we understand the wine as the Holy Spirit, then we notice that he always wants to communicate himself to people in the most diverse ways. Just as people are different, the Spirit also seeks new ways to reach them.

For all people, Jesus is the way God has chosen to reach us (*cf. Jn 14:6*). But how this happens, and how it happens again and again, and how we can participate in it, depends on whether we listen attentively to the Holy Spirit.