

A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Robert R. Hansel on Ash Wednesday, The Beginning of LENT, March 9, 2011 at the Chapel of St. Mark in Port Royal, South Carolina.

To Fast or Not to Fast

Well, the issue before us today is clear: TO FAST OR NOT TO FAST? that is the question. With all due apologies to Shakespeare's Hamlet, it seems to me that, as we begin the season of Lent, that is the basic question. Tradition says that in observance of Lent we should cause ourselves some discomfort, sacrifice something that we care about, put aside some pleasures and conveniences in order to identify with the suffering of Jesus on our behalf. Maybe you've already given the matter some thought. There are lots of possibilities: Will you give up cigarettes? Desserts? Drinking? Meat? Movies? In a few moments you will be invited to come forward and receive the mark of ashes in recognition that everything human is temporary and provisional—an illusion to be cast aside before the Eternal.

But here's the interesting thing: In spite of all that Christian tradition urging us to deny ourselves, in the Scripture we just read (Matthew 6:1-1, 16-21), Jesus appears to question the whole practice of fasting—at least any fasting that others are aware of. Jesus suggests something else—a quiet, private, internal sort of fasting. Jesus doesn't reject the idea that spiritual discipline may be very helpful but he suggests that such practices, most often, are only for show, largely symbolic, not getting to any kind of depth that might really change and transform a person's whole life.

Comparing these two views—our traditional practice of personal Lenten sacrifices and the clearly very different notion that Jesus talks about—has always been interesting and challenging for those of us who find themselves preaching on Ash Wednesday. So I thought that today we might think for a bit about the whole business of fasting. Let's see if we can shed some light on the subject, light that might make the observance of this Lent different and more meaningful.

If you go to the dictionary you'll find that there are several meanings of the word "FAST." Probably the most familiar is that which has to do with speed, motion, rapidity. To fast might well mean to speed up the pace of our religious journey. Winter is always a long, slow doldrums kind of season. It explains why our area of the country is full of tourists from Minnesota or Connecticut this time of year—they want to get out of the frozen climes and into a place where they can feel "alive" again. Actually, it's fascinating that the original meaning of the word, "Lent" refers to Springtime. So, maybe fasting during Lent might mean an initiative to come alive spiritually as a way to prepare for Easter. Without giving up anything, there are lots of things you could "take on" that would speed up your understanding and practice of the Faith. I'm thinking here of things like more frequent personal prayer, reading a book that offers new perspectives on life, increasing your financial pledge, or doing something that makes a practical difference to someone truly in-need. So, there's one idea: fasting can mean getting a spiritual "move on!"

A second meaning of the word “Fast” is making something secure or lasting. If you’ve ever sailed you know that it’s bad form to say that you’re going to “tie a rope to the dock.” The right term is to “make the bow line fast.” We certainly know about permanent dyes in clothing—the fast colors that have pretty much done away with the bleeding that used to happen when colored clothes were washed. St. Paul employs this second meaning when he enjoins us to “stand fast in the faith.” Fasting might mean strengthening our staying power, making the impact of Christ’s presence more permanent and lasting in our life. Certainly all of us could benefit from a more vigorous exercise of our beliefs and their impact on our everyday behavior. Like baseball’s Spring Training that’s underway right now in Florida and Arizona, it could be worthwhile to rededicate ourselves to the fundamentals of what it means to follow Christ in our daily living. So, a second way of approaching Lent might well be to get a firmer grip on your Faith.

The third meaning of the word “fast” offered in your dictionary is one that is almost obsolete, except in poetry. Milton, for instance, refers in Paradise Lost to something being located “fast by Hell’s gate.” He means, of course, nearby, or as we might say in South Carolina, “right close.” In the Bible, Boaz tells Ruth and Naomi to “abide here fast by.” The notion of drawing or remaining close, it seems to me, has direct application to our understanding of fasting. All of us, as Scripture tells us again and again, have “drifted off our moorings” in terms of our relationship with God. We are separated; we are stragglers; we tend to stray—but God continues to call us to return, to draw near, to stay fast by our Creator. How do we work at that? Maybe it’s just pausing a few minutes in the middle of a busy day to recognize God’s constant presence all around you. Maybe it’s being a little more regular in your attendance at Church. Maybe it’s making time to read God’s Word through daily Bible study. In short, place yourself where God is likely to be found, ready and waiting for you to draw closer.

So, three thoughts about what it might mean for you to fast this Lent: increasing the pace of your spiritual growth; getting a firmer grip on the message and implications of Christian belief; improving your relationship with the One who is the source of all that you are and all that you have. If any of these things make sense to you; if you think that your life might be made more satisfying; or if you think that your efforts to engage in fulfilling ministry would be enhanced then I commend the practice of fasting this Lent. Beginning today, this Ash Wednesday start to Lent 2011 may become for you a time of genuine personal growth. Lent doesn’t have to be an empty, meaningless giving up eating chocolate. That’s kid stuff. You can choose, instead, to observe a Lent filled with **creative fasting**: A time in which you increase the pace of your spiritual growth, get a firmer grip on your Faith, and renew your relationship with God.

What better ways could there be to prepare yourself for Easter?