

The Lenten Fast in King's Chapel

(The following notes are extracted from an essay by Bishop Kallistos Ware and Mother Maria that appears as an introduction to their edited *The Lenten Triodion*, Faber and Faber, London, 1977.)

Until the fourteenth century, most Western Christians, in common with their brethren in the Orthodox East, abstained during Lent not only from meat but from animal products, such as , eggs, milk, butter and cheese. In East and West alike, the Lenten fast involved a severe physical effort. But in Western Christendom over the past five hundred years, the physical requirements of fasting have been steadily reduced, until by now they are little more than symbolic. How many, one wonders, of those who eat pancakes on Shrove Tuesday are aware of the original reason for this custom to use up any remaining eggs and butter before the Lenten fast begins?

The primary aim of fasting is to make us conscious of our dependence upon God. If practiced seriously, the Lenten abstinence from food - particularly in the opening days - involves a considerable measure of real hunger, and also a feeling of tiredness and physical exhaustion. The purpose of this is to lead us in turn to a sense of inward brokenness and contrition; to bring us, that is, to the point where we appreciate the full force of Christ's statement, 'Without Me you can do nothing' (John 15: 5). If we always take our fill of food and drink, we easily grow over-confident in our own abilities, acquiring a false sense of autonomy and self-sufficiency. The observance of a physical fast undermines this sinful complacency. Stripping from us the specious assurance of the Pharisee - who fasted, it is true, but not in the right spirit - Lenten abstinence gives us the saving self dissatisfaction of the Publican (Luke I 8: 10-1 3). Such is the function of the hunger and the tiredness: to make us 'poor in spirit', aware of our helplessness and of our dependence on God's aid.

Yet it would be misleading to speak only of this element of weariness and hunger. Abstinence leads, not merely-to this, but also to a sense of lightness, wakefulness, freedom and joy. Even if the fast proves debilitating at first, afterwards we find that it enables us to sleep less, to think more clearly, and to work more decisively. As many doctors acknowledge, periodical fasts contribute to bodily hygiene. While involving genuine self-denial, fasting does not seek to do violence to our body but rather to restore it to health and equilibrium. Most of us in the Western world habitually eat more than we need. Fasting liberates our body from the burden of excessive weight and makes it a willing partner in the task of prayer, alert and responsive to the voice of the Spirit.

If it is important not to overlook the physical requirements of fasting, it is even more important not to overlook its inward significance. Fasting is not a mere matter of diet. It is moral as well as physical. True fasting is to be converted in heart and will; it is to return to God, to come home like the Prodigal to our Father's house. In the words of St. John Chrysostom, it means 'abstinence not only from food but from sins'. 'The fast', he insists, 'should be kept not by the mouth alone but also by the eye, the ear, the feet, the hands and all the members of the body': the eye must abstain from impure sights, the ear from malicious gossip, the hands from acts of injustice. It is useless to fast from food, protests St. Basil, and yet to indulge in cruel criticism and slander: 'You do not eat meat, but you devour your brother'.

The inner significance of fasting is best summed up in the triad: prayer, fasting, almsgiving. Divorced from prayer and from the reception of the holy sacraments, unaccompanied by acts of compassion, our fasting becomes pharisaical or even demonic. It leads, not to contrition and joyfulness, but to pride, inward tension and irritability.

Fasting, then, is valueless or even harmful when not combined with prayer. In the Gospels the devil is cast out, not by fasting alone, but by 'prayer and fasting' (Matt. 17: 21 ; Mark 9: 29); and of the early

Christians it is said, not simply that they fasted, but that they 'fasted and prayed' (Acts 13: 3; compare 14: 23). In both the Old and the New Testament fasting is seen, not as an end in itself, but as an aid to more intense and living prayer, as a preparation for decisive action or for direct encounter with God. Thus our Lord's forty-day fast in the wilderness was the immediate preparation for His public ministry (Matt. 4: 1-11). When Moses fasted on Mount Sinai (Exod. 34: 28) and Elijah on Mount Horeb (1 Kgs. 19: 8-12), the fast was in both cases linked with a theophany. The same connection between fasting and the vision of God is evident in the case of St. Peter (Acts 10: 9-17). He 'went up on the housetop to pray about the sixth hour, and he became very hungry and wanted to eat; and it was in this state that he fell into a trance and heard the divine voice. Such is always the purpose of ascetic fasting - to enable us, as the Triodion puts it, to 'draw near to the mountain of prayer'.

Prayer and fasting should in their turn be accompanied by almsgiving - by love for others expressed in practical form, by works of compassion and forgiveness.

The second-century Shepherd of Hermas insists that the money saved through fasting is to be given to the widow, the orphan and the poor. But almsgiving means more than this. It is to give not only our money but our time, not only what we have but what we are; it is to give a part of ourselves. When we hear the Triodion speak of almsgiving, the word should almost always be taken in this deeper sense. For the mere giving of money can often be a substitute and an evasion, a way of protecting ourselves from closer personal involvement with those in distress. On the other hand, to do nothing more than offer reassuring words of advice to someone crushed by urgent material anxieties is equally an evasion of our responsibilities (see Jas. 2: 16). Bearing in mind the unity already emphasized between man's body and his soul, we seek to offer help on both the material and the spiritual levels at once.

Always in our acts of abstinence we should keep in mind St. Paul's admonition not to condemn others who fast less strictly: 'Let not him who abstains pass judgment on him who eats' (Rom. 14: 3). Equally, we remember Christ's condemnation of outward display in prayer, fasting or almsgiving (Matt. 6: 1-18).

Our fasting should not be self-willed but obedient. When we fast, we should not try to invent special rules for ourselves, but we should follow as faithfully as possible the accepted pattern set before us by Holy Tradition. This accepted pattern, expressing as it does the collective conscience of the People of God, possesses a hidden wisdom and balance not to be found in ingenious austerities devised by our own fantasy. Where it seems that the traditional regulations are not applicable to our personal situation, we should seek the counsel of our spiritual father - not in order legalistically to secure a 'dispensation' from him, but in order humbly with his help to discover what is the will of God for us. Above all, if we desire for ourselves not some relaxation but some piece of additional strictness, we should not embark upon it without our spiritual father's blessing. Such has been the practice since the early centuries of the Church's life:

Finally, our Lenten abstinence does not imply a rejection of God's creation. As St. Paul insists, 'Nothing is unclean in itself' (Rom. 14: 14). All that God has made is 'very good' (Gen. I: 31): to fast is not to deny this intrinsic goodness but to reaffirm it. 'To the pure all things are pure' (Titus I: 15), and so at the Messianic banquet in the Kingdom of heaven there will be no need for fasting and ascetic self-denial. But, living as we do in a fallen world, and suffering as we do from the consequences of sin, both original and personal, we are not pure; and so we have need of fasting. Evil resides not in created things as such but in our attitude towards them, that is, in our will. The purpose of fasting, then, is not to repudiate the divine creation but to cleanse our will. During the fast we deny our bodily impulses - for example, our spontaneous appetite for food and drink - not because these impulses are in themselves evil, but because they have been disordered by sin and require to be purified through self-discipline. In this way, asceticism is a fight not against but for the body; the aim of fasting is to purge the body from alien defilement and to render it spiritual. By rejecting what is sinful in our will, we do not destroy the God-created body but restore it to its true balance and freedom. In Father Sergei Bulgakov's phrase, we

kill the flesh in order to acquire a body.

But in rendering the body spiritual, we do not thereby dematerialize it, depriving it of its character as a physical entity. The 'spiritual' is not to be equated with the non-material, neither is the 'fleshly' or carnal to be equated with the bodily. In St. Paul's usage, 'flesh' denotes the totality of man, soul and body together, in so far as he is fallen and separated from God; and in the same way 'spirit' denotes the totality of man, soul and body together, in so far as he is redeemed and divinized by grace. Thus the soul as well as the body can become carnal and fleshly, and the body as well as the soul can become spiritual. When St. Paul enumerates the 'works of the flesh' (Gal. 5: 19-21), he includes such things as sedition, heresy and envy, which involve the soul much more than the body. In making our body spiritual, then, the Lenten fast does not suppress the physical aspect of our human nature, but makes our materiality once more as God intended it to be.

Such is the way in which we interpret our abstinence from food. Bread and wine and the other fruits of the earth are gifts from God, of which we partake with reverence and thanksgiving. If Christians abstain from eating meat at certain times, or in some cases continually, this does not mean that the Church is on principle vegetarian and considers meat-eating to be a sin; and if we abstain sometimes from wine, this does not mean that we uphold teetotalism. When we fast, this is not because we regard the act of eating as shameful, but in order to make our eating spiritual, sacramental and eucharistic - no longer a concession to greed but a means of communion with God the giver. So far from making us look on food as a defilement, fasting has exactly the opposite effect. Only those who have learnt to control their appetites through abstinence can appreciate the full glory and beauty of what God has given to us. To one who has eaten nothing for twenty-four hours, an olive can seem full of nourishment. A slice of plain cheese or a hard boiled egg never taste so good as on Easter morning, after seven weeks of fasting.

Those who fast, so far from repudiating material things, are on the contrary assisting in their redemption. They are fulfilling the vocation assigned to the 'sons of God' by St. Paul: 'The created universe waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God. . . . The creation will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the glorious liberty of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning in travail until now' (Rom. 8 : 19-22). By means of our Lenten abstinence, we seek with God's help to exercise this calling as priests of the creation, restoring all things to their primal splendor. Ascetic self-discipline, then, signifies a rejection of the world, only in so far as it is corrupted by the fall; of the body, only in so far as it is dominated by sinful passions. Lust excludes love: so long as we lust after other persons or other things, we cannot truly love them. By delivering us from lust, the fast renders us capable of genuine love. No longer ruled by the selfish desire to grasp and to exploit, we begin to see the world with the eyes of Adam in Paradise. Our self-denial is the path that leads to our self-affirmation; it is our means of entry into the cosmic liturgy whereby all things visible and invisible ascribe glory to their Creator.