

# Comment

The season of Lent is an uncomfortable reminder that there is a basic dimension to christian discipleship which is to do with a struggle to the death with the powers of wickedness and evil. The collect for Ash Wednesday and the Gospel reading for the First Sunday are quite unequivocal about this: the former with its alarming language of "christian warfare" and "doing battle against the spirit of evil"; the latter by narrating an account of Jesus' confrontation in the desert with the devil's temptations. In both instances the equipment recommended for engaging in this battle and struggle is fasting. The Ash Wednesday collect prays that we may be "armed with the weapon of fasting", and St Matthew's Gospel tells us that Jesus was in a fit and healthy state to engage with the devil after he had completed forty days and forty nights fasting and "was hungry".

To say the least, there must be more than a few post-Vatican II christians who feel uneasy, not to say queasy about such language. Not only do we feel in better shape and morale if our stomachs are full but perhaps the very ring of the language of fasting and spiritual warfare is too reminiscent of those gloomy, sin-obsessed, joyless Lents of yesteryear; fish-infested Fridays, frail-tempered fathers deprived of their tobacco and/or beer. It sounds all too much of a piece with that happily departed style of christianity which we now brand as anti-life, anti-joy, anti-body, with more than a musty whiff of Manicheist hatred of the body.

What we have to rediscover, however, is that despite appearances, the contrary is true: that the true christian fasting of Lent is meant to help us in our struggle against those evil forces which are anti-life, anti-joy, anti-body. The pinch of Lenten fasting is pointing through the struggle and death of Calvary to the joy of Easter.

The heresy of Manicheism views material things and human bodies at worst as hateful and to be despised, at best as irrelevant, and certainly many of the forces in our world have their genesis in a kind of neo-Manicheism which teaches that human bodies do not matter. Because human bodies do not matter, there is no harm done in over indulging them with gross excesses of food while other bodies wilt and die for its lack; there is no harm done in

making a fortune by peddling addictive and body destroying narcotics; there is no harm done in using unemployment or cuts in health service and education facilities as a means to resolve another crisis of capitalism; there is no harm done in promiscuously using others' bodies for my pleasure; there is no harm done in aborting the bodies of the unborn; there is no harm done in abusing and torturing bodies as a way to controlling and manipulating their owners' minds.

According to St Thomas, fasting, since it is part of the virtue of temperance, helps to restore and promote our sensitivity and right relationships to material things and people. Instead of seeing material things and human bodies as somehow bad and potentially sinful in themselves and therefore to be fasted from, (as the old Manicheists suggest), true christian fasting has the goal of recalling us to the sheer goodness of things and bodies because they are the creation of God. The hunger and thirst produced by fasting is meant to restore the sensitivity of our palates to the sheer delight and goodness of food and drink. "Wine to gladden the heart of man, oil to make his face shine, and bread to strengthen man's heart . . . O Lord, how manifold are thy works! In wisdom hast thou made them all." (Psalm 104)

Moreover, as well as restoring our sensitivity to the sheer goodness of things and people, at the same time fasting is meant to restore our desire for right relationships with them. So that the good and delightful material things of this world are not up for the gluttonous grabs of the powerful and rich, but for the nourishing, sustaining and delight of all; and people's bodies can no longer be neglected, abused or exploited but only loved and cherished. That is why Lenten fasting has always been tied to almsgiving. "Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house." (Isaiah 58) The hunger and thirst for food and drink become the hunger and thirst for righteousness.

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