

Isaiah 58:3-10;

05.02.17

Fasting for justice

I wonder if you have ever been really hungry. I don't mean hungry as when you skip lunch or dinner is late. I mean serious hunger that debilitates and drains you and leaves you listless and unable to think about anything except food. Thank God that this is not something that most of us ever have to grapple with. For us food is a taken for granted in which we can afford to indulge, as witnessed by the spate of cooking programmes that have become so popular on television - Masterchef and all the rest. I have to say that they leave me feeling slightly uneasy – this luxuriating, this wallowing in food and flavour in a world where so many are severely undernourished and fortunate to survive on a monotonous diet. Such people know all about hunger pangs and sometimes it feels like we're flaunting our blessings.

I wonder if any of you fast and if so for how long. That might seem like an odd question but it should come as no surprise for fasting is actually an ancient spiritual practice which Jesus assumes that his followers will do. I once fasted for three days for a particular reason and I was quite shocked by the experience. 3 days is nothing and yet by the third night I was dreaming of food, longing and physically aching for the morning when I could be let loose on breakfast. It gave me some slight sense of what it must be like to have your whole being yearn for this essential thing, this necessity: nourishment, sustenance – food. And if we are to take seriously the testimony of the Bible it seems that just as human bodies hunger and yearn for food, so the human spirit hungers and yearns for God. We do not live by bread alone and while we can be physically malnourished and emaciated so also spiritually. Just now we sang a version of Psalm 42, a psalm which expresses exactly this longing for God pictured as thirst:

As the deer longs for flowing streams,
so my soul yearns for you, O God.
My soul thirsts for God,
for the living God.

Somehow this person has lost touch with God. Somehow God has become distant and they are like a deer parched and longing for water. And this image speaks to us of worship and why we worship. Here we come to God like that deer, longing for our thirst to be slaked, longing to connect with the source of

life. We come here not just to sing nice songs and to hear nice words but to feed and nourish our souls. And that helps to explain the discipline of fasting. Fasting becomes a metaphor for our yearning for God. Fasting creates an aching, physical craving for food. And that craving becomes fused with our longing for God. In fasting soul and body are united in deep desire.

Things, however, seem to have been different in Isaiah's day. Our reading there reflects a time when worship was flourishing. Church – or rather, temple – attendance was peaking. And people were going through all the spiritual routines, including fasting. But this was not out of desire for God but rather for what they hoped to get out of it. They believed that their piety would earn God's blessing, that it would prosper their businesses. They weren't seeking God – they were seeking their own ends. They needed to learn to seek not success and prosperity but the living God.

Into this scenario, however, Isaiah in our reading introduces another factor. Fasting fuses and combines our hunger for food, and our hunger for God. But there is another hunger that is every bit as essential for life as these – and that is the hunger for justice. And so the prophet Isaiah proclaims:

Is not this the fast that I choose:
to loose the binds of injustice,
to undo the things of the yoke,
to let the oppressed go free,
and to break every yoke?

And to be fully human is not just to be a physical being that craves food and drink; and to be fully human is not just to be a spiritual being that craves God; to be fully human is to be a social being that craves justice and right for the poor and the oppressed.

In this beautiful, sublime sermon on the mount from which we have been reading there is that verse that we read last week: 'Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness for they shall be filled'. Jesus could have said 'Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for God' for they are blessed indeed. And today as we gather at this table to receive bread and wine we are reminded of that deer in the psalm, parched and yearning, and we long to drink and to feed on God for our souls are parched indeed. And may God increase in us that longing - for God. But it's not enough. Jesus says more. He says, 'blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness' – blessed are those who hunger and thirst for right and for justice and for fairness and for

neighbourliness. And as we come to the table may God increase in us that longing too. Our world desperately – and increasingly - needs it. Amen.

O holy and gracious God,
light dweller, life giver,
we praise your holy name.
Once more you have brought light out of dark,
and day out of night;
once more we watch the turning of the seasons
and we praise you for your faithfulness,
for your reliability,
for your commitment to your world.
And you have shown your love in calling out a people
to bear witness to you and to your rule,
to live by your Law
and so to be salt to the earth
and a light to the world.
O God forgive us our failure.
Forgive us that we are unfaithful and unreliable in our commitment.
Forgive us that often what the world has seen in us
is not light but darkness.
Forgive us that we have failed to be salt,
enhancing life's flavour.
O God hear us as we acknowledge and confess our sins...

O gracious God,
faithful in love and grace and forgiveness,
keep faith with us
and give us you Spirit that we
may be faithful to you.
We pray in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord and saviour. Amen.