



*Some people came and asked Jesus, "How is it that John's disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees are fasting, but yours are not?"*

*Jesus answered, "How can the guests of the bridegroom fast while he is with them? They cannot, so long as they have him with them. But the time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them, and on that day they will fast." (Mark 2.18–20)*

Dear Friends

As I write this, the season of Lent is upon us, and with it traditionally a time of fasting. But what is the place of fasting in the Church's life?

The passage above shows that fasting was not a regular part of the way of life Jesus taught his disciples. When questioned about it, Jesus explains that fasting makes sense when God is absent, but not when he is present. While Jesus was with his disciples, it made no sense for them to fast. He admits that they will rightly feel like fasting on the day of his crucifixion because he will no longer be with them. But what about after his resurrection?

In John's Gospel, Jesus teaches us that his ascension is not a cause for grief, but for joy. Now that he's gone, we can enjoy his presence through the Spirit. The life he gave, the hope he brought, the end to death and the forgiveness of sins are all still there to be enjoyed. We must never be tempted to think we would be better off if we could see the physical, human body of Jesus walking amongst us—Jesus teaches us that his presence by the Holy Spirit is better by far, at least until the day when all humanity will see him face to face.

So does that mean we shouldn't fast, that the Christian life is one long party? Have we got Lent terribly wrong?

Not at all. What matters is that we remember that the purpose of fasting in our lives is different from that of the Pharisees and John's disciples. We do not fast because we want the Messiah to come – he has come already! We do not fast in the hope that we can persuade God to love or forgive us – what greater evidence can God give of his love and forgiveness than he has already given in Jesus? And we do not fast to force God to do some good he would otherwise choose not to do.

No, we fast because of who **we** are. We fast, because we recognise how easily we let something else take God's place in our lives; mostly ourselves, our desires and our ambitions. We fast to allow God to change us, to make us more the people he sees in us, and to enter in to the joy of life with him.

So let's make the most of Lent, not to break a bad habit of eating chocolate or watching too much TV (although both need to be broken, not least by me), but to get closer to God. On management courses, you learn that every "yes" means a "no" to something else. In fasting, every "no" means a "yes" to that fullness of life with God. What "no" in our lives might open up the door to a "yes" to God?

With blessings