

On this day we begin our journey into the fasting that comes with Great Lent. Specifically, we begin fasting from meat, so the name “Meatfare Sunday.” Fasting begins gradually. As a runner making a marathon prepares by smaller efforts, so our fasting is marked by preparation, of smaller fasting first. Every day of this coming week we may still eat eggs and butter, milk and cheese, and fish. By a week of smaller fasting we prepare for the greater fasting that will come. Why do we fast? What is the purpose?

Saint Paul gives us some answer. He tells us that “food does not commend us to God; for neither if we eat are we the better, nor if we do not eat are we the worse” (1 Corinthians 8:8). God does not need our fasting. He needs nothing from us. He is God. Fasting, rather, is our language to speak to God. Our stomach rumbles and we grow weary. These are the prayers our body adds to our words to God, that the whole of who we are, body and spirit, use this language of fasting, saying “God, I’m waiting for you and I want you.” (Elder Aimilianos) Fasting develops in us the sense of expectation not of food but of God Himself.

Heightened expectation of the divine Bridegroom, Christ, who is coming to the wedding feast that is his passion and death upon the cross. So we fast for Lent and Holy Week to make ourselves ready to receive our Bridegroom Christ who will come from the tomb as from a bridal chamber.

What if we are sick and cannot fast much? If illness keeps us from fasting as much as we would otherwise be able, we remember that “God does not require of anyone beyond their ability...illness is reckoned as a substitute for fasting; and this is even truer of the person who endures illness with patience and gives thanks to God. That person reaps the fruit of salvation from such patience.” (St. Barsanuphius). When we are ill, our body is crying out in prayer to God through illness rather than through fasting. And to our body’s prayer we join patience and give thanks to God for His abiding presence in us, a presence we cannot shake.

Paired with fasting is the mercy we make with the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick, the imprisoned as Christ tells us in today’s gospel. Christ Jesus is present in all of them. He is present in every human because He made us. Do we see Him in others?

Do we see Him in ourselves? Such sight is different from fleshly sight that sees things for profit or gain or curiosity. Seeing Christ in others is to see with the eyes of Christ Jesus Himself. To see Him in those we may think unlovable because of their deeds. Yet there He is, present in them. In the same way He is present in us. And we serve Christ when we serve the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick, the imprisoned.

From ancient times during Lent Christians took the money they saved on food by their fasting (not buying meat, eggs, cheese, and so on) and shared it as alms for the poor and needy. This work of mercy remains for us, too. As we begin our fasting from meat, let's take the money we save and give it as alms for our sisters and brothers who hunger and thirst, are strangers and wearing rags for clothes, for those who are sick and in prison. And so "let our compassion (for Christ in them) be a mirror where we may see in ourselves that likeness and that true image which belong to the Divine nature and Divine essence." (St. Isaac of Syria)