

Rev. Paul A. Hottinger

The Meaning of Fasting Friday after Ash Wednesday February 16, 2018 8:15 AM
Is 58:1-9a; Mt 9:14-15 (We need to recognize precisely what we need to change and go about it, and not only in our personal lives, but then in our social life.)

Today's two readings are focused on the idea of fasting. The reading from Isaiah segues perfectly with the New Testament. There are times when the Old Testament is criticized or somehow adjusted or corrected in the New Testament, but **Isaiah's teaching is something that Jesus would have wholeheartedly accepted**, the idea of **what is the meaning of fasting.**

It is of course giving up food, obviously, but not just, because the point Isaiah is making **to give up food, while if every other way pursuing your self-interests, is really incoherent.** You are introducing a practice that has no place in your life. It doesn't have any meaning. It isn't speaking of you and what you're doing with yourself. **This is all about what we do with ourselves, how we grow and develop, how we become the persons we become.**

And on the path to the person God wishes us to be, the image of God that God has created us in, we have **changes that need to be made.** And they have to do with **letting go of self-love and self-will** that are the primary force in the world, which is also the primary force in us because we've inherited that whole way of living from our ancestors in general and in particular. And we have individual issues to deal with in our own lives such as, for example, **racism** that lives in many families and many groups. It is displeasing to God and, therefore, it's something we have to let go of. There are **many forms of addiction** that live in certain families in particular or in certain individuals that have to be let go of in order to grow into the image of God that God desires us to be. So if fasting fits into that, wonderful. **If fasting fits into a new way of living**, focusing on God, not self, focused on God's will, not self-will, **then it all fits. But if fasting is just something you do, but in every other way you continue the same life, well then what good is it?** That's the point Isaiah is making.

We need to recognize precisely what we need to change and go about it, and not only in our personal lives, but then in our social life. In fact he talks about social issues here: “releasing those bound unjustly, untying the thongs of the yoke, setting free the oppressed, breaking every yoke, sharing your bread with the hungry, sheltering the oppressed and the homeless, clothing the naked when you see them, and not turning your back on your own.” So these are areas where **a whole society has to look at itself and recognize: what is not reflecting the will of God for us?** And just as individually we have to grow and reach perfection, well as a society we have to contribute also to its perfection, to its growth in regard to what God wills, which Jesus always called “the kingdom of God.”