

## **Jesus assumes we'll do... What? Fast When He's Gone!**

**Setting:** Jesus has just called his 12<sup>th</sup> and final disciple to follow him, Matthew the tax-collector. Matthew says yes, and then to celebrate the first thing he does is, invite Jesus, the other 11 disciples, along with all his tax collector buddies and other irreligious friends to a dinner party at his house. At this dinner party first the Pharisees crash it and question the disciples on whether Jesus knows whom it is he's eating with? Then after they leave the disciples of John the Baptist who has been recently imprisoned turn up. Here is where we pick up our reading this morning in

### **Matthew 9:14-17 (NIVUK) Jesus questioned about fasting**

<sup>14</sup> Then John's disciples came and asked him, 'How is it that we and the Pharisees fast often, but your disciples do not fast?'

<sup>15</sup> Jesus answered, 'How can the guests of the bridegroom mourn while he is with them? The time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them; then they will fast.'

<sup>16</sup> 'No one sews a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment, for the patch will pull away from the garment, making the tear worse. <sup>17</sup> Neither do people pour new wine into old wineskins. If they do, the skins will burst; the wine will run out, and the wineskins will be ruined. No, they pour new wine into new wineskins, and both are preserved.'

I will begin this morning with a riddle, or, at least what I hope is a riddle. This riddle is a common experience some of us here have had over the years, including myself. Here it is:

"Some of us have had to do it more than once. It is something that we know is for our own good, but becomes more difficult the longer the length of time we have to do it. The fact that others don't have to do it while we have to, is sometimes very frustrating."

What I am talking about it; what might I be describing? Answer: It is what is known as 'Nil by mouth' or a total fast before surgery or a specific medical treatment, test or procedure.

Think about it for a moment. We are not allowed to eat or drink anything for what can end up being quite a number of hours before surgery. Even longer if you surgery gets put off until the next day. I have heard a few horror stories from people over the years of their experience of Nil by Mouth.

However in spite of some of these negative experiences in our hospital system we know that we are abstaining for our own good as we trust and pray that our necessary surgery, the procedure, test or treatment, is successful. But at the time, it is not funny the longer you have to wait especially for the younger ones and those more senior in years. It is very, very hard to not eat or drink, and especially not to get grumpy about it when everyone around us are able to eat and drink freely.

Fasting today is something that we seem to only do when we have to. It is not something that most of us practice voluntarily until we require surgery and experience the 'Nil by Mouth' scenario. And that is when we become aware of just how important food and drink is as you languish on the end of the day's surgery list and maybe even get bumped to the next day... the more you think about having to go without food and drink. the more hungry you get and the more hungry and thirsty you get the more grumpy then angry you become - resulting in you being one *Hangry* person! Usually today we'll tell a young person, you're Hangry – go eat something, but you can't do that while awaiting surgery.

That was the riddle, now for a question. What is it that Jesus assumes his disciples with do, or practice as a certain spiritual discipline when he is no longer with them? Answer: *Fast-Nesteou* Which means to abstain as a religious exercise from food and drink: either entirely, if the fast lasted but a single day, or from customary and choice nourishment, if it continued several days.

Which is what I believe John the Baptist's disciples were doing when they burst in on the dinner party at Matthew's house because their leader, Jesus' cousin, as an ascetic who lived in the desert eating a diet of locusts and wild honey, had taught his disciples to fast regularly. Upon John's imprisonment his disciples were most probably fasting for his release. So that's why they thought Jesus and his followers should be doing the same. In the Old Testament it was the same scenario whenever you or your nation faced calamity or seriously difficult times then you or the Jewish nation would humble itself and repent through fasting. Now in Jesus' answer to them he drops a bombshell that the disciples and other guests completely missed. Yes, John's in prison and you are sorrowful and upset, but in the midst of this dinner party scene get this, v15.

*“How can the guests of the bridegroom mourn while he is with them? The time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them; then they will fast.”*

In comparison to celebrating at a week long wedding feast the opposite in effect was to happen, a sorrowful event for them to mourn over which will include fasting. In Jesus saying that he will be ‘taken away’ rather than going away, for the first time he has pointed to what was to be his own violent end and death which would cause deep sorrow and be reason for the disciples to fast.

Jesus assumes they will follow his lead and Fast when he’s gone! Jesus himself had fasted for 40 days when lead by the Spirit after his baptism into the wilderness to be tested by the devil. The Holy Spirit had come upon him at his baptism, and now, this period of fasting was to his benefit, to continue the process of spiritually preparing and empowering him for more than three years of ministry on earth that lay ahead, ushering in the Kingdom of God. During which time Jesus would only fast on the prescribed Jesus feast days such as the Day of Atonement.

In the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 6 after teaching on when and how to pray he spelt out to the disciples not ‘if’ but ‘when’ you fast. And that ‘when’ was to begin from the moment he was to be taken from them, first at his death on the cross and then post resurrection, to be continued after his ascension to heaven to be at the right hand of his Father.

Jesus assumes or fully expects then that his disciples including us today will practice the spiritual discipline of fasting, now that he has gone, until the very day that he as the bridegroom returns from heaven to be reunited with his bride the Church.

As the generations and millennia have passed in this interim time while the church awaits Jesus’ return, we certainly now live in a much different type of culture and society, complete with highly sophisticated technology, than Jesus and his disciples in their day. Which fits in with the following verses because we can learn next from Jesus when we specifically apply them to fasting.

Here Jesus speaks of not sowing new material on an old garment because it’ll make the tear worse, or putting new wine into old wineskins because it’ll ferment, stretch and expand to the point of bursting, (vv16-17). No, he said pour new wine into new wineskins and they’ll both be preserved.

The principal here is that Jesus brings a newness that cannot be confined within the old forms... When we apply this principle for instance to Fasting during Lent for 40 days as Jesus did in the wilderness. When you begin to consider what is it that I could fast from during this period beginning on Wednesday until Easter. One look at me, and your first thought will be 'food', definitely! First up is the original classic food then, where you might practice a weekly fast of about 24 hours or a day where you could eat dinner one night and then eat again the following evening, or even add in a daily 12 hour fast where you sat only eat between 7am and 7pm. If you cannot fast because of medical reasons, then you could maybe skip just one meal or cut out choice food whatever that is in your diet... you know all the good stuff that is supposedly so bad for you- cake, biscuits, dessert, chips, lollies, chocolate etc.

Other than a food related fast how might you work out what it is that you could or should give up and go without as a fast that gives glory to God in a meaningful and sacrificial way because it does or will cost you. For those struggling with what might be considered near or at the stage of obsession, compulsion or addiction it's easy to put your finger on it when it is alcohol, nicotine, drugs, caffeine, adrenaline rush, gambling, pornography, food, even shopping and credit card spending. Then there is the splurge of new technology created addictions such as Gaming, Pay TV Networks, or constantly needing to be viewing a screen to watch short movies or, needing to have an electronic device in your hand or within arms reach at all times to communicate with others including engaging throughout your day others on social media. In order to think of the thing that's got a hold of you, that would be greatly beneficial for you to give up entirely or severely reduce the amount of time spent on it, ask yourself this:

**What is it that you would rather do than eat when called to dinner or celebrate a meal with others- something that is so compelling and obsessive that it is not considered as fasting from food? What might it be?**

The thing you do that has such control over you so that you cannot easily disengage or pull yourself away from it, even at at dinnertime or when your body is telling you it is time or way past the time to eat or to go to bed and sleep. It could also include sports, fitness, hobbies, leisurely past times, TV shows, study, employment, work and making money... the list goes on.

As far as I am concerned you can call me anything but 'late for dinner'. I am always there, love my tucker, always have done, since as long as I can remember, except for onions of course. So I already know that some form of food fast that does not include onions, because I don't eat them, and fasting from something you don't eat, do, or do not like is never going to honour God or benefit you. So what else could I include? You might find it helpful to get someone who knows you well to think with you about what else you could fast from. For instance if I asked my wife this question I'm sure one of her first answer's would be... 'Netflix'. I found this series of Cloverfield Sci-Fi Movies the other evening and ended up watching all three of them- binge viewing they call it. This amount of viewing is certainly a distraction and form of entertainment that does not need to take such a big slice and focus of my life.

To put what I am saying another way. As a follower of Christ have you allowed Jesus to be 'taken away' because of an area in your life where you've crossed from near obsession, to compulsion, vice or even sin to fill a need or vacuum rather than seeking to have God fill it for you? As you practice this thing, Jesus is 'taken away' to be crucified again, and again and again because you have been unable to bring it to the cross where he shed his blood and gave his life for you. So there's no celebration there, just the opposite, only sorrow and mourning when you should be experiencing peace and joy with Jesus' Spirit dwelling within. But because Jesus has not died for you in this area of your life where you need forgiveness, to be delivered from this sin, healed and made whole, there is none.

This being the case – Jesus calls you to fast.

What if you gave this time over Lent to fast in some sacrificial way about the one major issue in your life that prevents Jesus' Spirit from having the Sovereign rule and reign of your life?

How about mourning this sad loss of Jesus in this area and commit to fast about it or from it, along with prayer and encouragement from others who could counsel and pray with you too.

For Jesus Assumes that we will fast, now that he's gone, but not with out the enabling presence and power of the Holy Spirit to transform you along with your fellow disciples to help too!

Myself, the Elders and Shirley are ready and available to pray with you for any such related issues that you might have. Let's Pray...