

Sermon by Tim Cooper on 6th June 2021 – Mark 2: 18-22

¹⁸ Now John's disciples and the Pharisees were fasting. 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?"

¹⁹ 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. ²⁰ But the time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them, and on that day they will fast.

²¹ "No one sews a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment. Otherwise, the new piece will pull away from the old, making the tear worse. ²² And no one pours new wine into old wineskins. Otherwise, the wine will burst the skins, and both the wine and the wineskins will be ruined. No, they pour new wine into new wineskins."

Opening prayer

Lord, we thank you for the gift of your Word and, as we think on these things, open our hearts and minds to hear your word to us.

Who were these different disciples?

The word 'disciple' means follower, adherent or apprentice. A disciple is someone who finds another person's ideas, or teaching, attractive. So much so, that they follow that person; they want to stick close to them, to be an adherent. They want to learn to be like them - and not just in theory, but in practice. Just like an apprentice. Consider some examples.

Stella McCartney, the fashion designer, who designed Meghan's wedding dress when she married Harry, had been an apprentice in Saville Row, where Britain's best tailors work.

The chef Jamie Oliver, having left school with 2 GCSEs, served as an apprentice to a leading chef, Antonio Carluccio, to learn about the Italian cooking that later made him famous.

And who can forget our previous vicar, Harry, having Leonardo di Vinci's painting of The Last Supper tattooed on his chest? di Vinci started his working life at 14 as an apprentice painter in Florence.

We read in this passage that John's disciples and those of the Pharisees were fasting. 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?**"

People followed John the Baptist because they were attracted to his message that people should live better lives before God, and his call for the Jewish people to prepare for the coming of the Messiah. So much so that they wanted to be baptised by him as a sign of rededication or repurification of life before God.

His teaching evidently attracted many disciples. According to the historian Josephus, he had so much influence that Herod Antipas had him beheaded not just to please his niece and stepdaughter Salome, but out of fear that he might stir up a rebellion among the Jews.

John was a great man – Jesus described him as the greatest who had ever lived. But he was merely a messenger, a prophet, who, in the words of the OT prophet Malachi, was sent to prepare the way for Jesus.

Other people followed the Pharisees, who advocated a more participatory form of Judaism in which rituals were not monopolized by an inherited priesthood but could

be performed by all adult Jews. They were attracted to the belief that all Jews - not just the Temple priesthood or Jews visiting the Temple - were to observe rules and rituals concerning purification. They liked the idea that Judaism extended beyond the Temple and that Jewish law should be applied to mundane activities to sanctify the everyday world.

The Pharisees have had a bad press, but unlike the other major social movement of that era, the Sadducees, they believed in an afterlife and some of them became followers of Christ, including Nicodemus, Joseph of Arimathea, of course, the apostle Paul. But they tended to be legalistic. They thought that Gentiles should follow Jewish customs and had to be challenged by Paul, who told them that the grace of God overcame the need for such rules.

So why were the disciples of Jesus not fasting? The people were curious, perhaps looking for a reason to criticise Jesus. Surely being a disciple of Jesus should not involve lower standards than being a disciple of John or the Pharisees.

What is fasting and what is its purpose?

To understand this passage, it is necessary to learn a little about fasting.

Fasting is a long-established practice that is common to most major religions. In the Judaeo-Christian tradition it can be traced to Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, when Moses instructed the Jewish people (Leviticus 16.29-30):

'you must deny yourselves and not do any work because on this day atonement will be made for you, to cleanse you. Then, before the Lord, you will be clean from all your sins.'

The phrase 'deny yourselves' is commonly understood to mean fasting. The King James Version says *'ye shall afflict your souls.'* The Hebrew word for 'fast' is apparently equated with the word 'afflict', which means cause pain or trouble. In other words, fasting is liable to 'trouble our souls'. To put it another way, fasting will affect the core of our being, who we are as individuals.

According to theologian Ian Paul - 'Typically in the prophets and the writings, fasting is associated either with grieving, repentance, or intense prayer for a particular cause.'

Since the time of Moses fasting appears to have become a regular or habitual act for the Jewish people, a practice which the early Christians evidently followed. Indeed the parallel passage to Mark 2, in Luke 5, records *'John's disciples often fast and pray, and so do the disciples of the Pharisees, but yours go on eating and drinking.'*

So, should we fast today? Fasting is not an easy practice. As anyone who has fasted can testify, it leaves one feeling weak. The normal type of fast is when people do not eat, but are allowed to drink. Some people fast more strictly and do not drink. This becomes a matter of 'life and death' as human beings can only survive without any food and drink for a short period. Any kind of fasting must be undertaken with great care.

What is God saying to you about this passage? And what are you going to do about it?

It is important to reflect upon what God might think about any decision to fast, and what might be the outcome.

There may well be circumstances when it is right for us, as individuals, to fast and I am aware of members of our church who fast. It is a way of communicating with God. It is a means by which our character is formed. It will affect the core of our being, who we are.

But it is also worth referring back to the prophet Isaiah, in which we read (Chapter 58 v3):

“‘Why have we fasted,’ they say, ‘and you have not seen it? Why have we humbled ourselves, and you have not noticed?’”

The people wanted God to notice that they were fasting, as instructed in Leviticus, but it seemed to them that He did not. Isaiah’s explanation (v4) is that their fasting was undermined by their moral behaviour: *“on the day of your fasting, you do as you please and exploit all your workers.”* He continued (The Message verses 6-9) -

“This is the kind of fast day I’m after:

- to break the chains of injustice, get rid of exploitation in the workplace, free the oppressed, cancel debts.

What I’m interested in seeing you do is:

- sharing your food with the hungry, inviting the homeless poor into your homes, putting clothes on the shivering ill-clad, being available to your own families.”

The message seems clear. To God, the morality of our behaviour is more important than fasting. Yet Jesus fasted. So it is important to be mindful that fasting and ‘doing good works’ are not alternatives.

To fast is, as we learned, to deny oneself. This flies in the face of our consumerist culture, in which many people claim a ‘right’ to consume whatever they want. It seems to them as if they have a right to foreign holidays, or to cheap goods.

At the same time, we may express a desire for justice and equality. Yet the world’s richest man, Amazon’s multi-billionaire boss, Jeff Bezos, is only rich because consumers buy through Amazon.

Amazon has been widely criticised for its bad workplace practices – only last week I was reading a review of a new book that exposes them in detail.

So what is the link here? God’s people are to ‘get rid of exploitation in the workplace.’ According to Isaiah, this is the kind of fast day that God is after.

This message is equally true today. Addressing the exploitation in the workplace at Amazon - or indeed, in our own workplace, if we have one - represents a kind of fast. Why? Because not shopping at Amazon is a way in which we ‘deny ourselves.’

What I mean by this is that trying to change the world is not easy. Amazon offers goods that are cheap and convenient. Trying to do the right thing – in this case, shopping in a more ethical way – means searching more widely, less convenience, and often paying more. But perhaps it represents the kind of fast day that God is after.

It is also worth noting that in the passage God also wants us to share our food with the hungry. We have tried to do this as a church. My only thought here is that we must check that the food we give to others is ethically sourced and healthy. Sin is

structural as well as personal, and we would do well to challenge the current food system while we seek to help individuals.

So, what was Jesus's response as to why his disciples were not fasting? The passage continues: **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."**

Jesus indicates that his followers were not required to fast at that time, and would not be required to do so until he ascended to heaven. But why?

By way of explanation, Jesus refers to himself as a bridegroom and speaks as if the times in which they were living were like one, long, wedding celebration.

This analogy Jesus makes here would not have been lost on those listeners who knew the Scriptures. Wedding terminology in the Hebrew Scriptures was common: God is often pictured as a groom who takes Israel, His people, as a bride – in, for example, Isaiah 54:4; Jeremiah 2:2; Hosea 2:19. And a similar analogy, between husband and wife and Christ and his church, appears in Paul's letter to the Ephesians (5:29-32):

"For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh." This is a profound mystery—but I am talking about Christ and the church."

Finally, I want to return to John the Baptist, who, as we learned at the outset, had disciples and - until put in prison by Herod - was baptizing them. In the Gospel of John (3:25ff) we read that doing so led to an argument with some Jews over ceremonial washing:

"They came to John and said to him, 'Rabbi, that man who was with you on the other side of the Jordan--the one you testified about--look, he is baptizing, and everyone is going to him.'"

John's response was not to be affronted at the competition posed by Jesus, but instead to draw a parallel with a wedding, at which he - John the Baptist - was a friend, perhaps the best man, to Jesus, the bridegroom. He replied to the Jewish observers:

"The bride belongs to the bridegroom. The friend who attends the bridegroom waits and listens for him, and is full of joy when he hears the bridegroom's voice. That joy is mine, and it is now complete. He must become greater; I must become less."

We do not always know the order in which Gospel events take place, but it is clear that John the Baptist understood what Jesus meant when describing himself as a bridegroom.

The explanation, then, is that, just as in the Old Testament God is portrayed as the groom who takes his Israel as a bride, in referring to himself as the bridegroom Jesus is asserting that he is the Messiah. Moreover, that the period during his ministry on Earth was like a wedding in which his followers, the church, was the bride. At such a time it was inappropriate to fast. It was a time of celebration, similar to the week-long feasts held during Jewish weddings.

Conclusion

To conclude, what can we take away from this passage?

First, to explore why we are disciples of Jesus. Other options are available! Why do we choose to follow him?

Second, are there occasions on which we should fast? We can reflect on why have we fasted, or not fasted, in the past?

Last, what form should our fasting take? Should it take the form of doing without food for a period of time, in order to focus on our relationship with God? Should it take to form of addressing injustice, exploitation in the workplace, oppression and debt; sharing food with the hungry, helping the homeless, clothing the needy and being available to our families?

Closing Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ,
send us out with confidence in your word,
to tell the world of your saving acts,
and bring glory to your name. Amen.