

Commentary on the Gospel for Mon, Jan 16th 2017

The message of today's gospel can be a bit elusive. At first, one might think that Jesus is condemning fasting per se. In fact, after the crucifixion, fasting has a place in the Christian community as it can serve to remind us of our need for God's love and mercy and of the power of God through Jesus for our salvation. In the Old Testament, fasting was a voluntary abasement during times of great stress or trauma. But Jesus is reminding his followers that his presence with them should be a reason for joy ("can the wedding guests fast while the bridegroom is with them?")

But there is a deeper meaning revealed as Jesus talks about the new versus the old ("no one pours new wine into old wineskins"). In Jesus' day fasting had become an important expression of the Pharisees' meticulous devotion to ceremonial law. This adherence to the Law was fundamentally incompatible with the new covenant that Jesus brings to the world. Rote fidelity to the trappings of dogma and the Law left no room for the message of love and forgiveness that is central to the Gospel. In our human condition, perhaps when we are a bit spiritually dry, do we run back to the Law as a way of keeping score on where we stand with God? If we do not cheat or steal, are faithful in our relationships, attend church, help others-- then we can rest easy about our relationship with God. However, fellowship with God is not based on the Law. It is rooted in our faith in the mercy and forgiveness of God and His faithfulness to his gift of grace for us.

When we are quiet within ourselves we know in our human condition that despite our own efforts we still sin. We can respond by working harder to build the façade of external righteousness or give ourselves up to the Holy Spirit to allow the deep internal transformation that God's grace promises us.

This kind of faith, in surrender to God, gives us restoration. It transforms living according to the Spirit from a burdensome obligation to a joyful way of taking part in the good life we can have with God in Christ.

And we can all use some restoration.

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