

Reflection for the Liturgy

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We are two days into the Lenten season and the readings of today provide challenges for those of us taking the season seriously.

The Gospel reading is from Matthew and is situated in between readings from Luke on Thursday and Saturday. This caused me to reflect on why this strange reading which seems to imply that the disciples were celebrating while others were fasting. A bit of research and reflection led me to a clearer understanding of what this might mean.

Matthew's Gospel was written for a community that had recently been excommunicated from Judaism by the Jewish and largely Pharisaic Council in about 80 AD. The community was faced with a crisis of faith: do we continue to follow Jesus or return to the traditions of Jewish law? Prior to these few lines, Jesus calls Matthew, seated at the customs post, to follow him. It seems Jesus is intent on teaching the disciples by having them follow along and learn by his example. The Mosaic law, still in the hearts of the early followers of Jesus, is contained in his teaching, but it is devoid of Pharisaic legalism and filled with the Spirit of love and mercy.

In the section from Matthew just before this passage, the Pharisees ask the disciples why Jesus eats with tax collectors and sinners. Jesus, overhearing the conversation, replies, "those who are well do not need a physician. I desire mercy not sacrifice." (Mt 9: 13) In today's Gospel the disciples of John want to know why they fast and Jesus' disciple do not fast? It seems that the followers of Jesus, while he was still alive, had little time for fasting. Following Jesus and learning from him was all consuming.

In the following chapters, the disciples witness Jesus' healing ministry and learn about what it means to be his followers. The legalism of the old law has no room in the Reign of God's love and mercy. The following lines of Mathews Gospel sum up the lesson: "You cannot put new wine into old wineskins...new wine, new skins..." (Mt 16-17)

This brings us to the first reading from the prophet Isaiah, a lesson in what is really required, even in the old law... let us read it slowly..." This rather is the fast that I desire...

- Releasing those who are bound unjustly...
- Setting free the oppressed
- Sharing your bread with the poor
- Sheltering the oppressed and the homeless
- Clothing the naked
- And not turning your back on your own.

Then your light shall break forth like the dawn and your wound be quickly healed.... then you shall cry for help and the Lord will answer, Here I am." (Is 5-8)

As I reflected on this passage, I could not help but think of our IHM Mission Statement, "Urged by the love of God, we choose to work with others to build a culture of peace and right relationship..." This is the message of the prophets and of Jesus. We are committed to bringing about peace and right relationships among ourselves, in the church and in our world, so fractured by those seeking power and wealth at the expense of the poor. We have witnessed this dramatically during the past few weeks as the people and land of Ukraine have been ravaged in an unprovoked war. During Lent, we are urged to take the time to reflect on our relationships with those around us, among us and beyond us; to heal the broken hearted.

This is the fast that Jesus desires... Then, at Easter, our light will break forth like the dawn and our wounds be quickly healed.