

Why Fast During Lent?

Each year during Lent, Catholics are reminded to fast and abstain from meat. But, why? Some would say Catholic people fast and abstain because of tradition; others because of the examples of fasting found in the Old Testament; others still, the example Jesus set in the New Testament. But why did those people, prophets and our Savior fast?

The original purposes of fasting and abstaining were to set aside the worldly, the pleasurable and the tempting and use that time to spiritually focus on praying to the Lord, praising the Lord, asking forgiveness from the Lord and acting righteously. We have several examples of such self-discipline being pleasing to the Lord in the Bible. One such example is in the third chapter of Jonah. The Lord told Jonah to go to the great city of Nineveh and announce that in 40 days Nineveh would be destroyed. The people heard the message and believed God. To be spared, "...⁵*they proclaimed a fast and all of them, great and small, put on sackcloth.*" (Jonah 3:5) The king of Nineveh and his nobles put out the following decree which resulted in the Lord's positive response (Jonah 3:7-10):

"⁷Neither man nor beast, neither cattle nor sheep, shall taste anything; they shall not eat, nor shall they drink water. ⁸Man and beast shall be covered with sackcloth and call loudly to God; every man shall turn from his evil way and from the violence he has in hand. ⁹Who knows, God may relent and forgive, and withhold his blazing wrath, so that we shall not perish. ¹⁰When God saw by their actions how they turned from their evil way, he repented of the evil that he had threatened to do to them; he did not carry it out."

But why abstinence? Again, this action can be seen (especially thousands of years ago in Jewish villages) as refraining from an uncommon delicacy (savory food) and then focusing on the Lord. This practice also has strong Biblical roots as being pleasing to the Lord. In Daniel 10:2-3 we find:

"²In those days I, Daniel, mourned three full weeks. ³I ate no savory food, I took no meat or wine, and I did not anoint myself at all until the end of the three weeks."

But why 40 days and why can fish be eaten? In Biblical history, forty days is associated with judgement and trial, in preparation for God's saving acts and graces. Remember 40 days and nights of rain resulting in flooding of the earth (Noah and the ark) and Jesus fasting for 40 days? These 40 day periods were followed by acts of Godly salvation. And while we give up the meat of certain animals during Lent, we may consume fish which is a symbol of Christ.

In summary, we should use Lenten fasting and abstinence as opportunities and reminders to get closer to our Lord!

References from New American Bible