

WEEK 3

Fasting



This week's theme is fasting, from a different angle, as I explore what I have learnt about fasting from Muslims and how this might be relevant to us as Christians.

We will look at: why fast (or why not?), what fasting looks and feels like, how do we spend our time when we fast, or what does it mean to turn attention away from the appetite to the Almighty.

Read

How come you're not fasting?!

Mark 2:18- 20: 'on that day they will fast' (v.20).

Fasting was a very common religious practice in the time of Jesus and, if we're familiar with accounts in the Hebrew Scriptures, prevalent before him too. It's hard to forget how David prays determinedly for the life of his new born son, with fasting, his courtiers insistently asking him to eat (2 Samuel 12:17). In this story from Jesus' life he is challenged about fasting. I imagine the encounter going like this:

People came and asked Jesus, 'All the really religious people fast but your lot don't, what's going on?' Jesus responded, 'Who decides not to eat when they're at a banquet? No one! But it's a New World Order, I'm here, inviting everyone to the party, though I won't always be here and they can fast then. (An extract from 'Jumbled up in Jerusalem' on medium.com)

Scripture is notable for the questions we don't ask about it, the things that we don't notice, that we half notice, or choose not to notice at all. This has a lot to do with the way that we read it – in chunks, in verses, or in the lectionary of course, disjointed, or in order to provide a 'text' or a theme. Or we get distracted by the exciting parts – here's Jesus trouncing his opponents again! But we

have to move on from this and ask, 'Where is it taking us, what new, or perhaps old, thoughts and actions is it inviting us to think and do?' So Jesus is telling us that we should be fasting - unless we think that his words only apply to his original followers, and, by and large, we don't. For some of us maybe Muslim friends can remind us about Jesus' own words!

Stop fasting!

Isaiah 58:3-12 'is not this the fast that I choose?'

This is a famous passage, likely to be read when Christians think about fasting, possibly giving the impression that fasting per se is not worth bothering with. The difficulty with fasting is, counter-intuitively perhaps, not the part which involves not eating, but getting hung up on externals: we think we are doing well in the following of our religion when we have ignored what it is really about. Hence this passage and, like all the most potent prophetic parts of the Hebrew Scriptures, it has a strong 'Gospel' message. No doubt it was an inspiration for Jesus when he told the story of the sheep and goats in Matthew 25.

Like many Christians, I think, fasting had played a small part in my life. I fasted once as a young person, giving money to charity to match the cost of food not eaten. I never did it again. Fasting might be mentioned in sermons and Bible studies and in connection with prayer, but the act of fasting was nowhere to be seen: there wasn't even any recognition of Lent. Yet even now, as well as calling for social justice (i.e. the Gospel), Isaiah is calling us to good fasting.

My Lent-Ramadan Encounter

Fasting was no longer off the menu when I encountered Muslims and Ramadan. I joined the Archbishop of

Canterbury's Christian-Muslim Relations Initiative on secondment from HM Revenue and Customs in 2002 and began an ongoing process of experiencing another religion, dialoguing with Muslims and asking many questions about Islam, and of course Christianity. My first question, after reading the Qur'an, was, 'What is Islam?' Inevitably this leads to the complementary question, 'What is Christianity?' This is also a question asked by Muslims – a friend on Facebook asking about the Trinity, imams in the desert in Kuwait asking me, 'What is the Gospel?' So, in response to the question, and questions, of Islam (including Ramadan) I asked, 'Well what is fasting, particularly Lenten fasting, in Christianity?'

It was revelatory to look into the history of my own faith, of Christians in times gone by or in other traditions, eschewing meat for the Lent season. I also took note of Anglicans who I worked with giving up alcohol for Lent (a longer term decision that I had already made) and a Coptic Orthodox colleague (normally vegetarian) who became vegan for Lent. There are strong Christian fasting traditions out there. If they were not particularly marked in my Methodist tradition, yet it did not surprise me to find out that John Wesley was a committed faster, or that the Moravians (his spiritual inspiration) also fasted. As a vegetarian I could have opted for an Orthodox vegan-style Lent but I love dairy way too much: this would be a challenge for another time. It seemed much easier as an inter faith aware Lent-fasting novice to adopt a Ramadan-style approach and not eat at all.

Of course, having tried Ramadan-lite during Lent, I then had a head start when Ramadan came around (in the autumn when I first encountered it) and I could begin to get my head (and heart and stomach) around it. For me the characteristics of Ramadan are: fasting, reading scripture and prayer. I choose these descriptions specifically, as they fit with both Islam and Christianity. The traditional Muslim fast is to abstain from food and drink (and other things) during the hours of daylight: the fast is broken at the end of the day after sunset. This equates, in a limited way, to the historic Lent timings of fasting (in whatever manner has been chosen) during the week and then breaking it on the feast days (Sundays), strictly after receiving the Eucharist. Neither religion's month (or longer) of fasting and penitence involves permanent fasting: it is punctuated.

As I reflected above, the decision not to eat frees up mind and body to focus on other things: by not being distracted by casual snacks and endless cups of tea (when fasting with an imam friend he teased me about my

tea addiction) one may hope, God willing, to be more conscious of God, and thus to be led into being more spiritual. For me, and I don't regard myself as a hugely spiritual person, Islam has been a wake-up call in the area of personal spirituality.

Muslims believe that Ramadan is the month in which the Qur'an was first revealed and the whole Qur'an is recited in mosques during the month. I have translated this into my Lent practice by reading the Gospels (at least) and doing so while commuting, in the process 'fasting' from free newspapers.

This ongoing process of learning about and from 'the other', witnessing the spirituality of Islam and then delving deeper into my own tradition, including other denominations, has taken me along paths and opened up new sights that I would never have encountered otherwise. It has added to my almost lifelong journey of wrestling with my own religion and brought unexpected blessings. My own interaction with Ramadan, shared on social media with the hashtag #Christians4Ramadan, was one of the inspirations for a movement of Muslims joining in with #Muslims4Lent. We may or may not want to see other people becoming Christians, but seeing them enjoy and appreciate our practices and spirituality, with sincerity and honesty, is a joy and an encouragement against a backdrop which suggests that religion is about intolerance, hatred and war.

Questions for discussion

1. What is the Bible telling us about fasting?
2. How might you include fasting in your Lent?
3. Are you open to learning about your own religion through encountering another faith?

Prayer

Loving and merciful God, we thank you for your abundant and generous provision, especially when we have food in the cupboard and on the table which enables us to fast at other times. Help us to appreciate the sincere devotion and love for you in other religious traditions and consider any ways in which we can share in a banquet of spirituality at times of fasting. This Lent, and later this year in Ramadan, enable us to stop, think and break our regular patterns to focus on you and what it means to be grateful human beings. Amen