

Monday of the Second Week in Ordinary Time

Gospel text (Mk 2:18-22): The disciples of John and of the Pharisees were accustomed to fast. People came to him and objected, “Why do the disciples of John and the disciples of the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?” Jesus answered them, “Can the wedding guests fast while the bridegroom is with them? As long as they have the bridegroom with them they cannot fast. But the days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast on that day.

No one sews a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old cloak. If he does, its fullness pulls away, the new from the old, and the tear gets worse. Likewise, no one pours new wine into old wineskins. Otherwise, the wine will burst the skins, and both the wine and the skins are ruined. Rather, new wine is poured into fresh wineskins.”

“Can the wedding guests fast while the bridegroom is with them?”

Fr. Joaquim VILLANUEVA i Poll
(Barcelona, Spain)

Today, we can see that, besides fasting on the Day of Atonement (cf. Lev 16:29-34), the Jewish people observe many other days of fasting, both public and private. Days of fast manifested mourning, penance, purification, preparation for a feast or a mission, demand of God's grace, etc. Pious Jews considered fasting an act of virtue of their religion which pleased God. One who fasts addresses God in an attitude of humility; he implores forgiveness for his separation from God while depriving himself of those things that often cause the separation.

That Jesus does not instill this practice into His disciples and followers comes as a surprise for John's disciples and for the Pharisees. They cannot understand it. But

Jesus gives them a fundamental reason: “Can the wedding guests fast while the bridegroom is with them?” (Mk 2:19). For Israel's prophets, the bridegroom signifies God Himself, faithful Yahweh, and His divine love for men (in contrast to Israel, His not always so faithful spouse). Hence, Jesus is tantamount to Yahweh, and here He declares His divinity: He calls His disciples “the bridegroom's friends”, and those who are with Him do not need to fast for they are not separated from him.

The Church has remained faithful to Christ's teaching on fasting which, though coming from the prophets and even being a natural and spontaneous practice in many religions, our Lord confirms with a new meaning. Fasting can be used as preparation; it strengthens prayer and contemplation. Jesus fasts in the desert as a preparation for His public life.

Many poor people, not unacquainted with shabby clothes were among those who listened to our Lord. So too were vintners who certainly knew what happens when the new wine is put into old wineskins. Jesus reminds them all that they have to receive His message with a new spirit, one that breaks with conformity and the routines of jaded souls; Jesus proposes something entirely different, not another version of the Law, but a new life altogether.

Thoughts on Today's Gospel

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“A different exercise of devotion is required of each. Such practice must be modified according to the strength, the calling, and the duties of each individual.” (Saint Francis de Sales)

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“The word of God is living and is free. The Gospel is newness. Revelation is newness. Jesus is very clear: new wine in fresh wine skins. God must be received with openness to what is new. And this disposition is called docility.” (Francis)

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“Outward sacrifice, to be genuine, must be the expression of spiritual sacrifice (...). The prophets of the Old Covenant often denounced sacrifices that were not from the heart or not coupled with love of neighbor. Jesus recalls the words of the prophet Hosea: ‘I desire mercy, and not sacrifice’ (Mt 9:13).” Catechism Of The Catholic Church, N° 2100)

