

“FASTING & FEASTING (Mark 8)”
Mark 2:18-22

In 1973, in Kingston, Surrey, a couple (who now wish to remain anonymous, for reasons which may well soon become obvious) were preparing to get married. Arriving at the church, they discovered that the vicar had been taken ill, so a replacement had to be found at short notice and the service got off to a rather bad start. During the vows, as the groom put the ring on his new wife's finger, she had a blackout and remained unconscious for twenty minutes, during which time the choir – obviously unprepared for such a situation – continually sang the only piece they had rehearsed (“Jesu, joy of man's desiring”), partly to disguise the noise of fanning, slapping and blowing. All seemed to get back on track, until the relatively happy couple made their way to the going-away car, which startled guests noticed had a cement mixer in it. The groom took the opportunity of telling everyone that unfortunately the honeymoon hotel they had chosen had burnt down the night before, so they were going to spend the time building a septic tank instead.

No doubt there are many other tales that could be told of weddings that went wrong and the number of people who send in their home videos of wedding disasters to programmes on the television are proof that all kinds of disasters can befall folk on what should be a celebratory occasion. And for the vast majority of people, a wedding is a time of celebration, isn't it? Not only is there the watery-eyed joy of seeing two people happily setting out on a new life together (or celebrating the relief that, as I think Coleridge said of Elizabeth Barratt and Robert Browning, their marriage to each other would ensure that only two people spent their lives in misery instead of four), but there is the prospect (usually) of a bit of a nosh afterwards, together with all the others delights that a reception has to offer.

In the time of Jesus, it was even more of a celebration. After all, most people would have been anticipating a wedding for quite some time. After the engagement of the happy couple would come the betrothal, and then it would be a year until the wedding itself. All the community would be invited and the festivities, which took place at the home of the bride, but were paid for by the groom, lasted a full seven days. There would be all kinds of food and drink and dancing, together, no doubt, with other expressions of joy and delight. (When I was in Nazareth a few years ago, a wedding was taking place just down the hill from where we were staying, which involved the repeated firing of automatic weapons into the air – a kind of Middle Eastern shotgun wedding!)

So such a celebration is an appropriate metaphor for the “age of salvation”, the coming of the Kingdom of God. Remember, that's what Jesus has come to announce and to inaugurate. Throughout the writings of the prophets in the Old Testament, and continuing in much of what Jesus taught and the other New Testament authors wrote, is this idea that the Kingdom of God is like a great banquet, a feast of good things for those who attend. There are several parables of Jesus which use that image. Jesus is now saying that this time of celebration is actually dawning. He has come, in the words of Mark, to announce this good news, this gospel. Something special is happening – it has been long awaited, but now it's here and here for people to enjoy.

And in the words we've read this morning, Jesus uses this metaphor in response to a question about fasting put to him by some of the people who have noticed differences in his way of doing things relative to the traditional way of showing religious piety. It is assumed by most commentators that this is another criticism and so this little story is part of a series of conflict stories (we've seen a couple already in this chapter), but there's nothing really to suggest that the people who asked this question were not genuinely curious. Of course, the fact that Mark has grouped this together with the other accounts of criticism of Jesus may indeed mean that these are critical rather than curious onlookers. If that's so, it really does seem that Jesus cannot do anything right for some people!

The issue is that John the Baptist's followers and the Pharisees all make a great deal of their fasting, but the followers of Jesus don't seem to worry too much about it. The criticism is actually of Jesus' followers, but the implication is clearly that it is somehow Jesus' fault – he's not teaching them right, or he's setting them a bad example, especially in the light of the last criticism of him, that he spends all his time eating and drinking with "sinners". Fasting is a part of the tradition of observance in most religions – the voluntary abstaining from eating as a form of self-discipline and as a means of focusing on the spiritual. For some people it is a complete abstaining from food and drink, for others it is partial, in terms of time or of food given up. It has certainly been a feature of Christian spirituality from the very earliest days and is practised by many people still today.

For the Jewish people of Jesus' day there was only one fast that was actually laid down in the law of Moses, and that was on the day of Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement (*Leviticus 23:27-29*). As time went by various groups added other fast days and the Pharisees, to whom we were introduced last time, fasted at least twice a week – on Tuesdays and Thursdays. And they liked people to know it, abstaining not only from food, but also from personal hygiene, and practically wearing t-shirts proclaiming "Look at me: I'm fasting!" Jesus pours scorn on them in *Matthew 6:16*. And those who had been influenced by John the Baptist's call to repentance also fasted regularly as a way of expressing their desire to change and, as we shall see in a moment, as a way of hastening the coming of the Kingdom.

But just notice one other thing before we go back to the main point of what Jesus is saying here. Jesus uses this picture of the wedding feast to say something about the coming Kingdom of God which he is inaugurating, but through it he implies that he is the bridegroom and here we have the first hint in Mark's story of his life that he is going to die a violent death. He says here that "*the bridegroom will be taken from them and on that day they will fast.*" Now, as we've already said, the wedding feast took place at the home of the bride. At the end of the celebrations, the guests left, but not the bride and groom. They stayed there. Jesus talks about the bridegroom being "*taken from them*" and the word used in Greek is an unusual one in the New Testament which means "taken away by force". It seems to suggest that one day Jesus will be taken violently from them and that day will be a sad one, because then his followers will fast. (That may mean that Christians will fast on Fridays, and some scholars think this has been put into Mark's gospel to provide a justification for the Christian practice of fasting on Fridays. I think it's more likely to mean "at that time".)

Anyway, that's a slight digression from the main point here. We have a powerful contrast here between Jesus' disciples, and the Pharisees and the followers of John.. Those who fasted regularly at this time were, as we've said, fasting with a view to God's acceptance and forgiveness, either because they were of the opinion, like the Pharisees, that it was only by strict observance of rules and tradition that they could work their way into God's good books; or because, like those influenced by John's teaching, they felt that this was an appropriate way to express their penitence and regret until such time as the Kingdom finally arrived, much as the Old Testament prophets had called them to do (for example in *Isaiah 58*). Whichever group of fasters you look at, this was very much the old way of doing things. It was part of a tradition that went back centuries and was heavily dependent on the idea that coming to God involved a good deal of getting yourself right beforehand.

So why didn't the disciples of Jesus do any fasting? That's the question put to Jesus by these curious critics. Well, replies Jesus, fasting is all about regret, about sadness and austerity. It's for those who are waiting for the Kingdom and hoping that it will soon be here. But it is here now! Those other people are fasting in the hope that the Kingdom will come, that they will find a place at the feast one day. My followers recognise that the Kingdom has now come and they're enjoying the feast. If you turn up at a wedding feast to celebrate with the bride and groom, they'll think it's a pretty rum do if you sit in the corner and don't touch the food and drink they're provided. Look, the Kingdom's here. The bridegroom's here – we're celebrating. That's not to say, of course, that there won't be times of sadness ahead – not least when the bridegroom is taken away – but for now, make the most of it. Have fun while you can. Something new is happening and it's well worth celebrating.

And what Jesus goes on to say emphasises that this is really a clash of old and new, a contrast between the traditions of the past which people have assumed will bring them closer to God, and the glorious, radical, earth-shattering new agenda of the Kingdom of God. As one writer (Robert Guelich in the *Word Biblical Commentary*) puts it:

“John’s disciples and the Pharisees represent in their own way the hope of Judaism for God’s action on their behalf. Their conduct has its roots deep in Israel’s past. To that extent they represent the old. Jesus comes announcing the good news about God’s action in history. He effects this in the experience of those who come to him in need and join him in fellowship. The new, however, and the old do not mix. They are incompatible with each other.”

This is part of the problem which Jesus is to face all through his ministry and which Mark is keen to highlight. Jesus comes bringing the offer of something radically new: he stands before them saying, in words that unfortunately now conjure up all kinds of other images in many people’s minds, “And now for something completely different!”

There are similarities, of course. There are aspects of what Jesus has to say that follow on from what has gone before, but by and large it is so new that a completely new way of thinking about it has to be accepted. There’s a lot that the old cloth and the new have in common, but you can’t mix them successfully. New wineskins are needed for new wine. These may seem curious metaphors for us, but they were very clear to Jesus’ listeners. In our culture where it’s probably as easy and as cheap to buy something new as to mend something old, and with all the different man-made fabrics that we use, the idea of sewing a patch on to an old garment is rather outdated. But if you sewed a patch of new cloth on to an old article of clothing, when it was washed or began to wear, the new patch would shrink and pull away from the rest of the garment and you’d have an even bigger mess than when you started. They were both bits of cloth alright, but the new just would not go together with the old effectively.

And now that we buy our wine in glass bottles, already fermented and ready to drink, we don’t have any idea of what it must have been like to produce wine as they did in Jesus’ day. When the grapes had been pressed and the juice extracted, it was put into goatskin bags to ferment and left for some time. If the goatskin was new, it would stretch as the juice fermented and the various gases expanded within it. But if you used an old goatskin, which would have been dry and hard, as the juice fermented, the gases would expand and burst the skin, ruining the skin and, of course, ruining the wine which would have been lost. I remember staying with my auntie many years ago and hearing a bottle of dandelion and burdock explode in her pantry – which ruined not just the bottle and the drink, but practically everything else in the pantry as well!

Jesus is saying here that the new and the old just will not mix. The Kingdom is coming and, although it might have a number of points in common with the old ways of looking for God, it is of such a different order that you cannot mix the two. The traditions of the past must be discarded in favour of a totally new way of behaving and believing. New structures, new ways of going on are necessary – and they must be **flexible**. Just like the new patch and the new skins, there needs to be room to change, room to move, an openness to change and variety. If you want to be part of the Kingdom, you need to discard any rigid tradition and unbending dogma and open yourself up to the new things that Jesus has come to announce and to inaugurate.

Many people have taken this to be about the church and the ways in which tradition gets in the way of the moving of the Holy Spirit. Back in the late sixties and early seventies there was a rash of books with “New Wine” and “New Wineskins” in their titles. Now I’m not disputing that you can apply this quite legitimately to the church and other institutions, but I’m not entirely sure that Jesus had that in mind here. I think he’s talking to people about their own response to these good tidings, to the arrival of Jesus and the anointed and appointed Messiah. This is about making the most of the Kingdom of God.

What Jesus is saying here is that you cannot enjoy the benefits of the Kingdom of God and remain as you are. This new agenda that Jesus has come to bring, this radically new way of living life and approaching God which he offers and invites you to accept, means that you will need to give up the old ways of thinking and change totally. It's what the Westminster whiz kids call "*blue sky thinking*" or "*thinking out of the envelope*". Jesus invites you to look at the world through his eyes, to adopt his agenda for life, to accept his invitation.

It's a step of faith, to be sure. We saw that exemplified last time in the response of Levi, who stepped out of his old life into a new one with no real idea of what would happen and no way of going back to the old ways. That's what Jesus calls you to. Step out of the old way of trying to make yourself good enough for God – whether it's by fasting or by strict rules and regulations or whatever – and celebrate the fact that, in Jesus, God has made you good enough for him. The Kingdom has come. Jesus has done the work. All he asks of you to become a part of his Kingdom is that you accept and trust. Once you do that there will be other things that happen, but, like Levi, take one step at a time. Celebrate with Jesus and enjoy his love.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- 1) Briefly(!) share any stories of wedding disasters you may have experienced or heard of.
- 2) Why is a wedding feast such a good metaphor for the Kingdom of God? What does it communicate to you?
- 3) What might people today wrongly assume it is necessary to do to be considered religious?
- 4) What might a "*new wineskin*" entail if we take the metaphor to apply to:
 - a) church structures?
 - b) personal life?
- 5) What about fasting today? Is it helpful? Should it be encouraged? Why/why not?
- 6) Look at *Isaiah 58*. What does that have to say to us about fasting and attitudes?
- 7) What have you learned from this passage?