

## FASTING

ST AELRED OF RIEVAULX<sup>1</sup>

**I**N the Gospel the Lord commends three practices: fasting, prayer, and almsgiving. Fasting restores man to himself; almsgiving restores him to his neighbour; prayer restores him to God. Nothing so takes man away from himself as impurity; nothing so alienates man from man as cruelty, and nothing so separates man from God as ingratitude. Fasting prepares the way for temperance which overcomes impurity. Almsgiving enkindles mercy which crushes cruelty. Prayer brings devotion and fervour which foster gratitude. This is the armour of God whereby we withstand the attacks of the devil. Fortified by these weapons, Moses turned the wrath of God from the people, put Amelech to flight and merited to receive the divine revelation. With this armour, David escaped the plots of Absalom. Elias, using the same weapons, freed himself from the hands of Jezabel. Ezechias laid low the army of Sennacherib by fasting and prayer more than by lances and spears. The Lord consecrated the very beginning of his public life with fasting and prayer. In the old law and dispensation definite times and certain days were appointed for fasting. The prophet Zacharias commended a fourfold fast when he said: 'Fasts you kept ever when three months of the year, or four, six months or nine, were gone, shall be all rejoicing and gladness for the men of Juda now, all high festival.' Since fasting is an affliction of the flesh, how do rejoicing and gladness fit in with it? At festivities men indulge in feasting and have joy, but in fasting they are serious and sad. Let us see how the Lord commends fasting. 'But do thou', he says, 'at thy times of fasting, anoint thy head and wash thy face.' These indeed are not the signs of sadness but of joy. They are marks more of festivity than of affliction.

There are many kinds of fasting and many reasons for fasting. There is fasting of necessity, of devotion, of piety, and of charity. Fasting of necessity is practised because of want, for the sake of penance, and as a measure of precaution. Those who fast out of

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want, not choosing to do so, merit nothing. When a man has sinned and accepts the afflictions of the flesh by voluntary choice, he performs the fast of penance. One fasts out of precaution to subdue the flesh that the incitement of food may not be an incentive to sin. In the fast of necessity from want, where all consolation is lacking, there is no joy, exultation, or festivity. In the fast of penance, there is grief at the recollection of sin. In the fast as a means of precaution, there is anxiety which comes from the fear of sinning.

Fasting of devotion may be done to discharge a vow or to win divine grace. Fasting of piety is practised for others. If anyone has subdued his vices by contrition of heart and continuous prayer, he begins to mount to the heights of virtue. Then it seems that he no longer needs to fast, according to the Scripture which says: 'Can you expect the men of the bridegroom's company to go fasting, while the bridegroom is still with them?' It is no longer necessity but piety that persuades a man to fast. For the weak need fasting and he should be an example to them. Perhaps this is that spiritual almsgiving which is common to all Christians. For just as what is superfluous should be given to those in want, so whoever abounds in spiritual wealth should give to those with less. The fourth kind of fasting is the fast of charity. Those living in solitude have no need to fast since they are accustomed to heavenly visitations and refreshed with the sweetness of divine consolations. They loathe earthly food and scarcely consent to take a sufficient amount to sustain their bodies for fear they might derive some pleasure from it. Their love of God pours such affection into their hearts that it allows them no delight in temporal things.

There is therefore corporal fasting and spiritual fasting. But it seems to me that affliction accompanies the former, exultation the latter. The holy prophet Zacharias, commending spiritual fasting, says: 'Fasts you kept ever, when three months of the year, or four, six months or nine were gone, shall be all rejoicing and gladness for the men of Juda now, all high festival.' Spiritual fasting is efficacious without corporal but corporal never without spiritual. The Lord says: 'With such fasting, with a day's penance, should I be content? Is it enough that a man should bow down to earth, make his bed on sackcloth and ashes?' All these things pertain to corporal fasting which the Lord does not accept, as his next statement proves: 'Think you that by such a fasting day, to win the

Lord's favour? Nay, fast of mine is something other.' The false claim learn to forgo, ease the insupportable burden, set free the over-driven; away with every yoke that galls! He shows here what kind of fasting he accepts. Fasting is not only abstinence from food, but much more than that it is the refraining from sin. Therefore the false claim learn to forgo. Whoever sins, sins against himself, his neighbour, or God. Sin is a dishonour to himself, an evil deed against his neighbour, an impiety towards God. Keep clear then of debauchery, says the apostle. Any other sin a man commits leaves the body untouched, but the fornicator commits a crime against his own body. He sins therefore against himself who brings violence upon his own body, subjecting his members to ignominious passions. He sins against his neighbour by false testimonies and the like. He sins against God especially by heresies and blasphemies, which proceed from pride. This pride is the false claim of godlessness, symbolized by the woman whom Zacharias saw sitting in the barrel. The cover of lead was fastened down and the barrel was carried to the land of Senaar, which is interpreted stench, signifying the uncleanness of the proud. Godlessness makes many false claims upon us, enchaining our wretched souls and polluting them with the sordid food of vice. Pride blinds the eyes of our hearts, depriving them of the light of truth and feeding them on empty errors. Some are so inflated with pride that they ignore God's justice and, independent of God, glory in their own. They are the ones who consider themselves great although actually they are least, wise although they are stupid, good although evil. They appear glorious in their own eyes while they are a laughing stock and an abomination to others. Unhappy souls, so fettered that they delight in the darkness of their own errors.

Envy, the worst offspring of its parent pride, is another vice which makes its false claims upon us. It ignores, dissimulates, perverts, or despises all that it sees praiseworthy in another. When it detracts the good or ruins the reputation of others, lessening the esteem in which they are held, it feeds on its own suspicions and thinks it is feasting on the finest foods. Fasting as a check to such licence is very pleasing to God. Another false claim of wickedness is independence whereby man thinks himself sufficient unto himself. This vice makes him rebellious to the counsel of another and obedient to his own decisions. There are many who know through experience how serious it is to be enmeshed in the nets of their

own will, how difficult, well-nigh impossible, it is to free themselves from it. For whoever becomes the slave of his own will considers easy whatever it dictates, intolerable whatever does not proceed from it. Self-will makes fasting easy, and the burdens of the day light. It endures laborious days and sleepless nights. It changes just as easily to the opposite, practising at first what is useful and then what is useless. He feeds his own soul with vain joy, not depending at all on what others think. Shun this pest, for there is none more hidden, none more pernicious.

There are certain others who do not seek but even condemn the praises of men. Nevertheless, because they please themselves, they ruin everything they do. They hold all in contempt and so rejoice in themselves that they despise the reputation of others, whether good or bad, and rest in the false glory of their own conscience. Let us hear now what fasting the Lord commends: Learn to forgo the false claim, for whoever will be bound by these false claims cannot practise salutary fasting. Granted he afflicts his soul by day with corporal fasting, nevertheless, he feasts interiorly on the food of his own unclean thoughts. Ease, he says, the insupportable burdens. Often the many burdens that we ourselves, not others, have placed weigh us down. To ease and disperse these is to offer a fast most pleasing to God. For although the soul seems to be refreshed happily enough with burdens of this kind, still this reflection hard-presses when it is accompanied by desolation. So the soul goes forth in pursuit of corporal things and brings back with it sense images which it stores in the memory. These images feed the soul with various thoughts which soon burden it with innumerable delights and temptations. The prophet says well that these burdens should be eased by confession and by the consideration of divine judgment. Set free the over-driven. For today, today's troubles are enough. There are many who hold their senses, thoughts, and affections in slavery, subjecting their whole soul to the body, paying all their attention to it, getting neither joy nor sorrow from anything else. The mind accustomed to these things is over-driven under this yoke, now by anger, now by wrath, now by empty joy, now by useless sadness. Set free the over-driven, you who fast, that your thoughts may be able to fly freely to the heights of virtue. Away with the yoke that galls. The burdens that weigh upon the soul are due to habit, corruption, mortality, unhappiness, concupiscence, and attacks of the demons.

He does away with the yoke that galls who conquers bad habits, does not yield to corruption, overcomes mortality, bears misery with equanimity, resists concupiscence, and does not consent to the evil suggestions of the demons. These are the fasts acceptable to God, which the prophet Zacharias commends: 'Fasts you kept ever, when three months of the year, or four, six months or nine were gone, shall be all rejoicing and gladness for the men of Juda now, all high festival.' The number four pertains to the world, which is composed of four elements and is terminated by four directions, signifies the bodily senses, which their Creator's wisdom apportioned to five parts of the body. Seven prescribes quiet, the rest God took on the seventh day after the creation of the world. Ten shows the decalogue of the law where God promises to the labourer the denarius of eternity.

Love of the world begets pride and allures to carnal delights. Solitude imposes restlessness of body and the yoke of bad habits and concupiscence impedes the perfection of the divine commands. Whoever by contempt of the world does not vaunt himself nor envy others nor feed on their praises, nor glory in himself, celebrates profitably the fast of four days. Whoever shuts his ears to murderous counsels, closes his eyes to harmful sights, and with Daniel abstains from feasting and wine, assuredly offers the sacrifice of the five-day fast. And whoever puts aside the care of the body and is not solicitous for today or tomorrow, who abstains from all dissensions and happily keeps a spiritual sabbath within himself, celebrates most joyously the seven-day fast. Then if the galling burdens which we have just mentioned are eased through God's grace working in the mind and heart, he will complete the ten-day spiritual fast as he bends his will to the divine commands. An acute awareness of great virtues infuses joy into these fasts but not without almsgiving too. Whence the prophet immediately adds: Share thy bread with the hungry, give the poor and the vagrant a welcome to thy house; meet thou the naked, clothe him; from thy own flesh and blood turn not away. Yet if this precept is understood only according to the letter, it does not include everyone. But if you interpret bread as the opportune word or example, that is as counsel, and home as the affection of the heart, you will easily see how this almsgiving pertains to all. Therefore if to the brother who hungers and thirsts for holiness you show the word of edification and the example of a good life, you are giving bread

to the hungry. If you who are rich in virtues recognize another who is wanting in them, if you do not spurn your own flesh in him, which is a reminder to you of your former weakness, but draw him to your heart with arms of compassion, you have opened the door of your house to the needy. Approach, counsel, console, soothe him whom you see exposed to temptations and you have covered the naked. A man purged by such fasting, recreated by such almsgiving, enters the inner room of his own heart, closes the door of all his corporal senses, and pours out his soul, and then crosses over into the place of the tabernacle, leading the way to God's house amid cries of joy and thanksgiving, and all the noise of holiday. For the great festival is celebrated not only with men but with angels, not with the sound of the mouth but with jubilee of soul, not with carnal delights but with spiritual feasts. Therefore, by fasting we macerate the body so that through the fruit of good works we may be refreshed in soul. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.



## DETACHMENT

By E.B.

**I**N that most helpful little book by Fr Bede Jarrett, *No Abiding City* he gives us the key to what is meant by 'Detachment'. We are pilgrims in this world, travellers; 'here we have no abiding city', and so we must 'travel light', as the saying goes. There is a great temptation in the modern world to accumulate more and more things—they all seem necessary somehow, and the advertisements in any paper or periodical that we open try to persuade us that we *must* have this or that—and so perhaps we get it and then persuade ourselves that we cannot possibly do without it.

Or if we are not attached to 'things', we may become attached to sitting in a special chair, a special way of doing things, a special seat in church. We can become attached to our comforts and our food. In religious life, we can become attached to some devotion,