

Matthew's weekly musing

15th January 2021

When you fast.....

I've been musing on my varying patterns of fasting over the years.

Long ago, in fact long, long ago, before children, before ordination,



newly married, and in the second year of faith, I used to fast once a week. By which I mean I would miss a whole day's meals.

I've been trying to remember just *why* I undertook this discipline. In part it was youthful (mid-20s) enthusiasm for a new-found faith. This enthusiasm wanted to give everything 'a go'. I had read in Matthew's gospel, "When you fast" and had realised it didn't say "*if* you fast".

The outcome was certainly that I prayed more! The rumbling tummy was a constant reminder, "Pray!" I also read my Bible more: after all, I had learnt that fasting was a window through which Jesus would become more real.

At the time I had only a dim awareness of any outcome from this fasting. Certainly over two years, I came to appreciate the Bible more. Certainly over those years, I grew into awareness of God as Father, Jesus and Holy Spirit. At the time my faith was also being fed by regular worship and by joining a group which met weekly to explore the Bible. We learnt to how to pray for each other.

Then everything changed. I suddenly found I simply couldn't fast. I was caught up in the life of theological college; Jane began a midwifery course; we were mourning the friends we had left behind. I had moved from a life full of purposeful activity as a teacher, to being a passive student and I found this very difficult.

Eventually I heard the Lord saying, "Well, you are in a new way of fasting. You are lost in the maelstrom of a new challenging life. Can you find me in this?"

And then another fast came along. Jane became life-changingly ill. We found ourselves puzzled, only just coping. My angry prayer became, "Lord where are you in all this? You are a loving heavenly Father who likes to give his children good things and we are suffering and losing good things."

Eventually we stopped trying to get out of our circumstances. We almost stopped asking God to rescue us. We slowly began looking for the Lord *in* our circumstances.

And there He was. The light was shining in our darkness. The darkness wasn't being taken away. I could write so much about what this means, but I'll give two headlines. One is that we found a one-ness with Jesus in his sufferings, and loved Him the more. Two, we found a trust in the Lord and His ways which has never left us.

Then jump forty years to the present. I can look back and find "the God who loves people" in many a demanding situation. I have found Him as companion in many a fast as we waited for situations to resolve or unfold.

And now I find I am entering another, and inevitable, fast. I am not as physically active as I would like to be. My memory is not what it was. I do less in a day than I would like to. Life is ever-so-slowly changing from doing to remembering, from participating to reminiscing, and I'm approaching the final putting down of the familiar, and yielding completely to the presence of God, Father Son and Spirit.

The prayer is inevitably, "So Lord, where are you in this fast?" Of course I know the answer, "I'm in the place I am preparing for you."

Matthew 6

- 16 "And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. ¹⁷ But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, **18** so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.
- 19 "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; ²⁰ but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. ²¹ For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.