

**Homily for February 19, 2006
Seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time (B)**

By Father Charles Bowes

Isaiah 43:18-19, 21-22, 24b-25

Psalm 41:2-5,13-14

2 Corinthians 1:18-22

Mark 2:1-12

With God, we don't always get what we asked for...but we get more than we bargained for.

Eighth Sunday in Ordinary Time (B)

26 February 2006

Hosea 2:16-17, 21-22

Psalm 113:1-4, 8, 10, 12-13

2 Corinthians 3:1-6

Mark 2:18-22

Are we able to look beyond where we are now to something altogether new?

Recently our world celebrated both Jewish and Muslim fasting practices of

Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement) and Ramadan. A strong component of these religious holydays is fasting.

Jews fast from food and liquids for two days.

Muslims fast each day from

sunrise to sunset and then can eat in the evening.

For faithful adherents of

any faith, fasting is seen as a means of piety that calls for repentance and

humility as one seeks the mercy of God. As a Jew, Jesus fasted. A long fast

of 40 days and nights marked the period immediately prior to his public

ministry. Next Sunday, the first Sunday of Lent, we will proclaim that

Gospel. As Christians, we fast not to earn anything from God, but rather

to make room in us to receive what God already wishes to give. Fasting, as

any pious act, changes us, not God, makes us available to welcome and

receive God's invasion.

What Jesus was opposed to was any fasting that was designed to show off

one's piety. This would be the exact opposite of inviting God, but rather of

excluding God with our own self-importance. This was his problem with the

Pharisees. To make a point about why his disciples aren't fasting Jesus uses

the image of a bridegroom. In that culture the actual wedding ceremony was

followed by a week of celebration at the home of the groom. Continual

feasting and dancing marked the happy event.

There was a dispensation for

everyone from religious observances, such as fasting, so that everyone could

have a great time. You may recall the days when Catholics abstained from

meat on Fridays as a form of piety and self-

discipline. But when a major feast day, such as Christmas or, in some places, St. Patrick's Day occurred on Friday, the fast was suspended so that people could enjoy the festivities. The bridegroom is now Jesus. When he's around you don't have to fast. He will be gone soon enough after his death. Fast at that time as you await his coming again. In his book *The Kingdom of God is Like...*, the Trappist monk Thomas Keating says, "When God graciously comes into our lives for a few minutes, it is not the time to practice your customary austerities ... and say ... 'come back again some other time.'" We all have had experiences of "putting on the dog" when special guests come or when we have not seen a loved one for a long time. We bring out the good wine. Jesus is obviously the new wine with a fresh, new message of salvation. One does not savor that unless he or she is willing to put aside some old ways of looking at God. These old ways are "old wineskins" that may be worn out and cracked. Jesus asks us to contemplate the new truths he is bringing and to accept fresh ways of expressing our faith. Fasting may or may not be a prominent part of our Lenten program, beyond the minimal requirements of the season. In fact, Lent is not so much about us and our pious practices as it is about Christ and

our relationship to God and to other persons. The most important task of the Lenten season is to link up with Jesus and with the saving significance of his death and resurrection. That is what we celebrate every time we gather here and with keener awareness during the upcoming Lenten Season. Are we able to look beyond where we are now to something altogether new?