

**Homily for February 26, 2006  
Eighth Sunday in Ordinary Time (B)**

**By Father Charles Bowes**

**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 the Jewish and Muslim fasting practices of Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement) and Ramadan. A strong component of these religious holy days 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 to 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, and 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...rather 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.

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