



FASTING.

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THOSE who are in the habit of resorting to sermons must be aware that an increasing number of religious teachers insist upon "fasting" as a distinct duty. Very few of them however venture to define what they mean by fasting. They can hardly do so without abandoning the example wisely set them by the Church to which they belong. The clergy of the Church of Rome promulgate the pastorals of their superiors which distinctly lay down rules as to the things which people may eat and may not eat. This is what the Church of England has never done; evidently because she thought it beyond her province. She has regarded it as an undue interference with individual liberty. It is beneath her dignity to insist on formal rules of "touch not, taste not, handle not," which only refer to things which perish in the using; and she is well aware that such rules, trivial and undesirable in themselves, fall with very different weights of incidence on different persons. Even the Church of Rome has laid down the general principles—(1) that fasting must always be rational; (2) that it must always be regarded as a means not as an end; (3) that the poor, who live in chronic destitution, and those who are in weak health, are *ipso facto* exempted from the obligation; and (4) that *all* are so exempted whom fasting incapacitates from the adequate performance of their daily duties. These are large exemptions. They prove the relativity of the obligation, and the last especially gives wide room for uncertainty. Besides this the Church in early days closely connected fasting with alms, and frequently put forward the duty of giving to the poor the money saved by diminution of food—a motive which in these days would not come to much in the letter. And over large regions of the Romish world—even in such a country as Spain—exemption from the Lenten fast has often been purchasable by small sums of money, handed to the priests for religious purposes. Rigid rules necessitate many exceptions, and leave room for unlimited causistry. Our own Church has surely shown her wisdom and moderation by contenting herself with appointing Lent as a period of "fasting *or* abstinence," and leaving the words to be interpreted by the individual conscience to indicate that form of self-denial which may seem most conducive to the advantage of the society and of the individual soul.

"Fasting" is of two kinds—natural and ecclesiastical. Natural fasting means the total abnegation of food and drink at whatever cost of hunger. Ecclesiastical fasting means the setting of certain *limits* on the kind and quality of our food. Abstinence means "the depriving ourselves of certain kinds of food and drink in a rational way, and for the good of the soul."¹ In its wider sense it is interpreted to mean the abstinence not only from food, but from *anything* which it may cost us self-denial to give up.

Now when preachers tell their congregations that it is a duty to "fast," they go beyond the rule of their Church unless they add "or abstain"—since the two things

¹ See *The Catholic Dictionary*, by W. E. Addis and Th. Arnold. The views current in the Romish Church may be seen in St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa*, 2. 2^{dæ}, Qu. 147.

are different. And further, the word "fasting" is so indefinite and elastic that it may mean almost anything. Some young ladies think it a piety to keep the Lenten fast by giving up sugar with their tea; and some young gentlemen think it sufficient to give up, or to limit, the use of cigarettes. Now there is not the smallest harm in these practices, if they be rated at the infinitesimal importance that belongs to them. But do not let any one regard them as "fasting." There is a sort of sham amateurish fasting, which, if it ends with itself, is not of the smallest significance either to gods or men, and which one can only think of with a smile. It becomes however distinctly harmful when it inspires an inward self-satisfaction, or makes those who practise it indulge in the luxury of thinking "I am not as other men are, or even as that Protestant." Whether we fast or not, there are many ways of making Lent very real to us as the festival—I use the word deliberately—the festival of self-denial. The excellent St. Gregory of Nazianzus, feeling a frequent temptation to censoriousness and sharp speeches, most wisely devoted his Lent to a serious effort at amendment by keeping almost unbroken silence for forty days. How quite infinitely the world would gain if nine-tenths of us adopted for a similar end an analogous discipline! St. John Chrysostom was a rigid ascetic yet, in his sermon on fasting he says, "If any one say to thee, 'I have fasted all Lent,' say thou, 'I had an enemy, but I am reconciled to him; I had a base habit of detraction, but I have left it off. I had an ungodly habit of swearing, but it is amended.'" The views of the early Christians closely agree with these. They always represent "fasting" as a thing of supremely little value in comparison with beneficence and almsgiving. One instance will suffice. In the *Shepherd of Hermas*,¹ one of the earliest Christian writings, which in the second century was placed almost on a level with Scripture—the writer tells us that while he was "keeping a station," in other words was fasting, the Good Shepherd came and asked him, "What is this fasting which you are observing?" He replies that it is his customary fast; and the Shepherd replies, "You do not know how to fast unto the Lord; *this useless fasting which you observe to Him is of no value.*" "Why, Sir?" I answered. "The fasting which you think you observe," he said, "is not a fasting. God does not desire such empty fasting. For fasting to God in this way you will do nothing for a righteous life; but offer to God a fasting of the following kind—Do no evil in your life, and serve God with a pure heart; keep His Commandments, walking in His precepts, and let no evil desire arise in your heart; and believe in God. If you do these things, and fear Him, and abstain from every evil thing, you will live unto God; and *if you do these things you will keep a great fast, and one acceptable before God.*" This is obviously written in the spirit of St. Paul, and of those unequalled spiritual teachers the Hebrew Prophets.

I should like to indicate what kind of fasting is, in my humble opinion desirable, and what is undesirable.

i. First I think that far short of enfeebling and fretting hunger, which is unnatural and seems to me frequently to cause as evil an effect morally as it does physically, it would be a very good thing for nearly all men if they were more moderate in the quantity of food habitually taken. Three very hearty and almost plethoric meals a day, with meat at all of these, and various lighter "nips" and "afternoon teas" intermixed, is a not uncommon allowance; and, as all wise doctors tell us, it is far more than is desirable for any one, unless it be for vigorously growing boys, and athletes who take an immense amount of exercise in the open air. It is told of one of the most eminent physicians of the day that visiting a person of importance he excited him to something like fury by saying: "There is nothing in the world the matter with you except this:—you eat too much and you drink too much." "I sent for you, sir, to give me a medical opinion" was the reply; "and I wanted to be cured from gout, rheumatism, and other maladies from which I am suffering." "And I have given you my medical opinion," replied the physician; "there is nothing in the world the matter with you except that you eat too much and drink too much. And my fee for visiting you is twenty guineas." The patient paid it with a paroxysm of indignation, but the advice might have been more valuable to many patients than a hundred prescriptions.

ii. Secondly, I venture to believe that all society would gain by diminishing the consumption of meat. Queen Elizabeth ordered a fish diet on Wednesdays and Fridays, not for any ecclesiastical reason but (ostensibly at any rate) to encourage the fish trade, and to diminish the demand for flesh. That interference with the market

¹ *Hermas, Pastor*, iii. *Lim.* 5.

was not wise ; but I think that the adherents of the Vegetarian Society will do good if they persuade multitudes to learn the value of whole meal bread, and oatmeal, and vegetables, and fruit, and not to rely so exclusively on beef and mutton. The poor especially might find in porridge, and lentil soup, and well-cooked vegetables a far cheaper, more wholesome, and more sustaining diet than the often unsatisfactory, coarse, and even unwholesome scraps which they buy from the butchers at a far greater cost.

iii. Thirdly, if we are to attach any importance to a mass of medical evidence, that form of abstinence which consists in the entire abandonment of all intoxicants in Lent would certainly do no harm to the vast majority, and might become in time a new means to promote that national growth in temperance which if once it reaches the poorer classes would be the cure for some of their deadliest and most appalling miseries.

In these, and in many other ways, Lent may be wisely observed and not least by cultivating the habit of generous giving. In this way we may rise superior to the mean and deadening vices of the love of money on the one hand, and on the other of that slightly expanded selfishness which has been described as the *egoïsme à plusieurs* in contradiction from the *egoïsme à soi*, and which is hardly less injurious to nations and individuals than egotism pure and simple.

But in these days a considerable minority practise real fasting, and during Lent weaken themselves by the pangs of actual hunger. Now I cannot pause here to show, as may be shown most decisively from both the Old and New Testament, apart from their traditional misinterpretation and interpolated words, that *such* fasting is not required of any man, and is on the contrary based on error. It is characterised by St. Paul as displaying "a show of wisdom in will-worship, and humility, and severity to the body," but as *not* being "of any value against the indulgence of the flesh." There are many temperaments—and this is the point on which it seems desirable to insist, because it is almost universally overlooked—on which real fasting does *not* tend to self-mastery over the passions and the lower nature. There are numerous errors on this subject widely-spread and deeply-seated. It ought however to be known, and to be clearly stated, that in itself fasting is not an aid to sober-mindedness, but rather the reverse. Its notorious physiological effect is to turn our thoughts upon the needs of the body, and to give intensity to the desire for their satisfaction. Physicians and historians know as a fact that it stimulates rather than checks the sensuous imagination. This is in no sense of the word an idle theory and an unwarranted assertion. It is derived from the confessions of experience, and is indicated by the facts of many a biography in the volumes of the hagiologists.¹

Let two witnesses separated from each other by the space of fifteen centuries suffice to prove it.

1. Fired with the then prevalent ardour for the ascetic ideal, the youthful St. Jerome fled into the desert of Chalcis, and lived among the hermits. He has published his frank confession of the inefficacy of the severest starvation to control the bodily impulses. His body, he says, was broken with incessant fastings, but his mind was in a fever of evil imaginations. "Oh how often," he exclaimed, "set in the desert, and in that vast solitude which scorched by the fierce rays of the sun afforded to monks a horrid dwelling-place, how often did I find myself amid the sensuous delights of Rome. I was alone and filled with bitterness. My limbs were rough with sackcloth ; my body squalid as an Ethiopian's with fasting. Day by day I wept and groaned and denied myself sleep, and if overborne with weariness I sank upon the ground my bones rattled like those of a skeleton. Yet while from fear of hell I had made myself a companion of scorpions and wild beasts, my imagination rioted among luxurious dances. My face was pallid with hunger, my soul was heaving with concupiscence."² Surely those who with a sound mind in a sound body, have learnt, by humble reliance on God's blessing upon their care and watchfulness, to secure over themselves a tranquil mastery, may suspect that conflicts so fiercely agonising were *caused* by self-maceration rather than cured by it, and that a body weakened and unhinged by unnatural deprivation of necessary food and forced to absorb itself in resisting the imperious instincts of natural need, finds it more and not less difficult to triumph over the desires of the flesh and the disorders of the soul.

¹ See Rothe, *Theolog. Ethik*, §§ 873—875.

² *Jer. Ep. ad Eustochium* (Vallarsi ii. 93). I have a little softened and abbreviated his language.

2. And this is the testimony, fifteen centuries later, of one whom I may venture to describe as a living saint of God. "Such mortifications," says Cardinal Newman, "have at the time very various effects on different persons, and are to be observed *not from their visible benefits but from faith in the word of God. Some men are subdued by fasting . . . but others find it, however slight, scarcely more than an occasion of temptation.*" It often "makes a man irritable and ill-tempered. . . . What very often follows from it is a feebleness which deprives him of his command over his bodily acts, feelings, and expressions. Thus it makes him seem to be out of temper when he is not. . . . because his tongue, his lips, nay his brain are not in his power. He does not use the words he wishes to use, nor the accent and tone. He seems sharp when he is not Again, *weakness of body may deprive him of self-command in other ways; perhaps he cannot help smiling or laughing when he ought to be serious . . . or when thoughts present themselves his mind cannot throw them off . . . any more than if it were some dead thing . . . but they then make an impression on him which he is not able to resist. Or again, weakness of body often prevents him from fixing his mind on his prayers, instead of making him pray more fervently; or again, weakness of body is often attended with languor and listlessness and strongly tempts a man to sloth. Yet I have not mentioned the most distressing of the effects which may follow from even the moderate exercise of this great Christian duty. It is undeniably a means of temptation,"* and may expose Christians "to thoughts from which they turn with abhorrence and horror."¹

It is true that in spite of these remarkable admissions, confirmed by records of which a student of ecclesiastical history could not be ignorant, Cardinal Newman still regards rigid fasting as a duty on the grounds—as I think recent criticism will pronounce the *mistaken* grounds—that it is required of us in Scripture. This is not the place to enter into the Scriptural argument which I have done elsewhere. It will be sufficient here to say that in the Revised Version the word "fasting" disappears altogether from three or four of the texts on which the chief reliance was placed. And I most fully concede that in any self-denial humbly undertaken under the conviction that it is a duty, no man will be suffered hopelessly to fall. The saints won the victory over themselves because they were saints, and because they were in earnest, not because they fasted: and other saints no less saintly have won it as completely, and with far greater ease and happiness, in accordance with the wise guidance of nature, reason, and conscience, without afflicting themselves by the agony of hunger. Such fasting is at any rate no duty, but rather the reverse, for those who feel that it intensifies the very difficulties which it is their duty to annihilate or to minimise. We daily pray "Lead us not into temptation," and we have no right to practise any form of fasting which only makes our temptations more severe, while it makes us less able to resist them. No injunction either of Scripture or of the Church requires us to subject our bodies, which are the instruments of our souls, to such weakening influences as make us more liable to the assaults of irritability, impurity, and sloth, and less powerful to overcome them. To suppose that we are bidden periodically to adopt this form of self-denial when there are so many other methods of abstinence which are of untold benefit both to ourselves and our neighbours, seems to me to mistake the meaning alike of the Law and of the Gospel. It is to place ourselves on the dizzy pinnacle and cast ourselves down in challenge of the promise that the angels shall bear us up so that we dash not our foot against a stone.

Let me not be mistaken. I advocate habitual moderation, habitual abstinence, constant self-denial, and from some things *total* abstinence. If there is no mean between the two extremes; if one is compelled to make a choice between the habits of hermits on the one hand, and the hearts "as fat as brawn" of

"Men full of meat whom most God's heart abhors,"

then I would hold up both hands ten times over for the miserablest Troglodyte of the Sketic Desert, rather than for drunken Nabal or luxurious Dives. But no such choice is forced upon us. And it is possible for us even to enjoy "spare fast which oft with gods doth diet," without extravagances which are the reverse of meritorious—extravagances of which many of the greatest saints from Francis of Assisi down to the Curé d'Ars have repented in their maturer years—and which in themselves constitute rather a hindrance than a help.

¹ See "Fasting, a Source of Trial," *Parochial Sermons*, vi. 7, 8.