



PARISH OF ST. PETER'S HALLIWELL, BOLTON

TRANSFORMING BOLTON TOGETHER IN JESUS' NAME

The Preacher's Notebook by Rev. Canon Paul Hardingham

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True Fasting

Ash Wednesday sees the start of Lent, the 40 day period of penitence, self-examination and fasting running up to Easter. Fasting can be a neglected discipline, but it plays an important part in the Christian life. Jesus began his earthly ministry by fasting in the wilderness for 40 days and he taught his disciples to fast (ie not *if* but *when*): *'when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that it will not be obvious to others that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.'* (Matthew 6:17/18). Fasting is voluntarily abstaining from food etc to focus on God and give time for prayer. Prayer and fasting usually go hand in hand, as together they glorify God. We don't fast to manipulate God into doing what we want or to impress others. It's not a command, but a choice we make to develop our relationship with him.

What are the benefits of fasting?

Firstly, giving up something expresses my desire to put God first in my life. Secondly, fasting shows me the things that I depend on rather than God, so that I can surrender them to him. Thirdly, fasting encourages me to have a deeper hunger and dependency for God. It gives me space to focus on God for his strength, provision, and wisdom and results in a more intimate relationship with Christ. As Isaiah points out, it's not self-centred, but part of our care for the poor, *'Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to lose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke?'* (Is 58:6). Fasting enables the Holy Spirit to reveal my true spiritual condition, leading to brokenness, repentance, and a transformed life, with a heart more attentive to God.

How do we fast?

Usually fasting involves missing one or two meals during the day, although some can't abstain from food for medical reasons. This will give us more space in our day for prayer and solitude. It might also include abstaining or limiting the time I give to television, alcohol, chocolate, social media or even sex (cf 1 Cor 7:1-5)! However, Lent can also be an opportunity to embrace new spiritual disciplines eg joining a small group, *'random acts of kindness'*, reading a Lent book (eg *Living His Story* by Hannah Steele, the Archbishop of Canterbury's Lent Book) or giving more time to prayer and Bible study (why not use the *Lectio 365* App, with readings and prayer?). Whatever you do, make Lent count this year!

'Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.' (Matthew 5:6)