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PRAYER AND FASTING
TO-DAY

BY
D. B. KNOX

THE PROTESTANT FAITH

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This is the season of Lent and some Christian denominations make it a special time of fasting and abstinence. Just like the other seasons of the Christian year such as Easter or Christmas it is based on an incident in our Lord's earthly life. After His baptism in the River Jordan He was led by the Holy Spirit into the wilderness. It was a time of testing for Jesus, a time of reflection as He faced the future and considered how He should go about the work of His ministry which was to lead to His crucifixion. You may remember that the Devil suggested wrong methods, methods which were not based on trust in God, though they promised quick results and personal prominence. It would also be a time of prayer for our Lord, and during this forty days in the wilderness when His mind was taken up with these great questions, we read that He fasted. The season of Lent is based on this event in our Lord's ministry. It was not observed in the early centuries

of the Christian era but it was a custom which grew up later, and if our practice is to observe Lent it is important to note some of the principles which need to be observed.

The Bible makes clear that prayer is a regular obligation on Christians, and that there is also a regular obligation on all of us to examine our lives to see whether or not we are walking in the way of God's will. St. Paul reminded the Corinthians that if we judged ourselves we would not be judged by the Lord (I Cor. 11:31). And just as many Christians find that it is a help to have a regular rule for daily prayer and Bible study, though no rule is laid down in Scripture, so the forty days of Lent coming once a year may be found helpful for those who use it for self-examination and renewal of their Christian duties. The Bible gives some clear principles to be kept in mind. First there is Jesus' teaching about fasting. It is interest-

ing to note that He never told His disciples to fast, nor does the rest of the New Testament contain any instruction or command that Christians should fast. In fact, Jesus said that it was out of keeping that His disciples should fast while He was with them (Mark 2:19). But of course many of our Lord's contemporaries used to observe the set religious fasts which had become customary although not enjoined in the Bible. Jesus did not condemn this form of religious activity, but said that it was important that it should always be a spiritual activity. In Matthew 6:16 Jesus said "When you fast... be not seen of men to fast but of your Father which is in secret and your Father which seeth in secret shall recompense thee". It is all too easy to fulfil our religious activities with what St. Paul calls "eye-service", to be seen of men. This temptation is not of course confined to religious activity, but applies to all activity whether

at home or at work. This 'eye-service', the desire to be seen and approved by others rather than by God, springs from lack of faith in God. We do not really believe that He will see and reward us and so we prefer to take the near at hand - the praise of our fellow men rather than the praise of God. So the first lesson in observing Lent is that we must observe it with deep faith in God and not observe it in a way that will simply conform and be approved by our fellows.

Secondly, we must remember that self denial for the sake of self denial has no spiritual value. In Isaiah 58 the Prophet reminded his hearers that the self-denial that is spiritually fruitful and pleasing to God is not fasting, but active service of others, the putting ourselves out to help them. Isaiah says in God's name "Is not this the fast that I have chosen... Is it not to deal thy bread to the hungry and that thou bring the poor that are cast out to thy house" and so on. The same is

said in Zechariah 7 where the relieving of the needy and the vindicating of the oppressed is the form of fasting which God prefers. Of course it is only called 'fasting' by way of metaphor. It is not self denial for its own sake, but self denial which takes the form of putting ourselves out for other people's needs. This form of self-denial is not of course confined to forty days in the year but is an on-going activity. In other words our religious exercises must not aim at ourselves but at other people's good, for in serving other people we serve God.

You may have noticed that the Pope has recently lightened the Roman Catholic rules for fasting. Roman Catholics are now no longer required to fast throughout Lent but only on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday. But an enquiry as to what the Roman Catholic Church means by fasting shows that for them fasting consists of having one good meal a day, including as much meat as you like, plus two

lesser meals; and the Roman Catholic moral theologians (for example, H. Davis, S.J. Moral and Pastoral Theology II 429) allow the good meal to last for two hours if necessary and the lesser meal to consist of so much porridge that you could not get through it all. It is difficult to see the spiritual value of such activity, or why it is called fasting at all. It is a step in the right direction that this compulsory fasting is reduced to two days in the year but it would be much wiser to abolish all these rules for fasting, because after all if fasting is a spiritual exercise directed towards God as Jesus taught that it must be if it is to be undertaken at all, then it must spring up out of the situation of our life, just as Jesus' fasting in the desert did. It cannot be imposed by ecclesiastical rules. For once we begin to impose rules for fasting we soon reduce the matter to an artificial and even absurd level.

Fasting should be an expression of our spiritual feelings. This was the case with our Lord when as He faced His ministry that lay ahead, He gave Himself to prayer, thrusting aside the unworthy temptations of Satan. It was no time for feasting. Fasting was natural in those circumstances because His spiritual experiences were deep. Similarly, when the Pharisees complained that His disciples were not observing the regular ecclesiastical fasts, He replied that it would be unnatural for them to fast while they had Him with them but at the time when He was taken from them fasting would be a natural activity for them.

But what about us in Australia to-day? Is there no event in which we as individuals, or congregation by congregation, should not be earnest in praying for personal and national repentance, and for rain, as I know very many are doing. God can save by many or by few. After all,

Elijah was only one man and yet as the result of his prayer there was both a drought and the breaking of a drought (James).

When God does send rain let us not fail to acknowledge with thankfulness the Giver. This drought should remind us that we have been very forgetful of our dependence on God; for God controls the weather through the meteorological laws which He Himself has made. God allows droughts and other evils to enter our lives for the purpose of calling us back to Himself, or teaching us some spiritual lesson. But we should judge ourselves so we don't need these judgements of God. If we feel no need to vary our happy-go-lucky existence because of the war in Vietnam or because of the drought, it is an indication of our spiritual shallowness and this will not be changed by imposing ecclesiastical rules on us but only by exhortation from God's Word to turn back to Him, to call upon Him

in repentance. As we see more of God's holiness, and realise more deeply the sin of our negligence and forgetfulness of Him, the desire to turn aside from everything else in order to pray will arise naturally in our hearts. This is what is meant when we read that the early disciples prayed with fasting. They were so taken up with concern that they gave themselves to calling upon God. This must have been something of our Lord's experience as He faced His ministry in the wilderness and we need to turn to Him with repentance, and prayer for our country as well as for ourselves. We need to deepen our apprehension of spiritual reality. We need to deepen our concern for God's holiness. When we fast let us not for a moment have our eyes on what other people are thinking or even what they have told us to do so that we should be seen of men to fast; but we should think only of our Heavenly Father who sees in secret and who has promised to answer our prayers if we

pray them earnestly with faith.

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Quotations of these for the
Lancet may be obtained
(1) per year (paid) by
writing to "The Lancet"
Editor, 10, York Street
London.

10 March 1933

"THE PROTESTANT FAITH"
is broadcast
every second Sunday
at 9.15 p.m.
over 2CH

Copies of these fortnightly
broadcasts may be obtained
(£1 per year posted) by
writing to "The Protestant
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13 March 1966