

TFTD for LENT: Monday March 7th
FEASTING AND FASTING: ACTS 2.42-47

HOLYHABITS



Today we begin a new series of Thought For The Day for Lent, taking us up to Holy Week and Easter. Our theme for these five weeks is “Holy Habits”, based on the book by Andrew Roberts, which we’re also using as the basis for the Churches Together Lent Groups. Andrew contacted me just before Lent and was very excited when I told him we were using his book — he sends his greetings!

“Holy Habits” is a catchy phrase for the ordinary day-to-day things we do that help us to grow as Christians, individually and together. It’s based on the story in Acts ch.2.42-47 about very beginnings of the church at Pentecost, when 3000 new disciples started the adventure of following Jesus. These verses describe ten identity markers of what it means to follow Jesus. (Take a look at the passage and see if you can find them!) Those habits have been forming Christians and helping the church to grow ever since its beginning. And because it’s Lent, we’ll begin by looking at FEASTING AND FASTING.

HOLYHABITS



They followed a daily discipline of worship in the Temple followed by meals at home, every meal a celebration, exuberant and joyful, as they praised God. [Acts 2.46, The Message]

When I was in hospital a few years ago, I spent quite a lot of time looking down at the inner courtyard beneath my window. Across the way was a space I couldn’t quite make out — was it a café? A classroom? A waiting room? As evening came on, and the rest of the hospital started to shut down for the night, this space came alive with people bustling about

preparing food, eating and drinking, children running about excitedly. Maybe it was a staff canteen? But this looked more like a family party. It was fascinating — but baffling.

Then a nurse came into my room. I asked her, “Do you know what’s going on over there?” — and her face lit up. “Oh, that’s for us,” she said — “us Muslim nurses. Because it’s Ramadan, and we’ve been fasting all day. People from the community bring in home-cooked food to the chaplaincy and bring it round the wards for us to break our fast. It’s lovely food, too!”

That conversation reminded me of another encounter, when we were invited to visit the Cheadle mosque one summer evening, and were treated to a generous feast of home-cooked food. That was Ramadan, too — a time of fasting during the day, and feasting at sundown. Not a time of sadness, but a shared experience of challenge and discipline, binding the community together, and released in a joyful and generous feast. Fasting at Ramadan is important for Muslims — but it’s part of a wider ecology of feasting and abundance.

How does fasting fit into our understanding of the Christian life? “Giving something up for Lent” is a long-established Christian tradition (that’s why Pancake Day comes the day before Ash Wednesday, using up all the eggs and sugar before Lent begins). The Ash Wednesday service talks about “fasting, prayer, and acts of service”. It’s not a discipline most of us take very seriously (what are you giving up?) — though I do try to set myself a small challenge every year (alcohol? No, chocolate is the real challenge!).

The idea of fasting as a spiritual discipline is a very ancient one. In Lent, we remember Jesus fasting for forty days in the wilderness at the beginning of his ministry (Luke 4.1-13). For Jesus, it was a time of challenge and discipline, cutting down to the essentials in order to focus on God and listen to his voice. It was a time of testing, when Jesus faced the tempting voice of Satan, casting doubts on his vocation and trying to deflect him from God’s path — the path that was to lead to the Cross. So in Lent, we try to journey with Jesus into the wilderness — and thinking about the way we eat is one way to focus that down into the realities of daily life. You can’t get more basic than food!

But Jesus wasn't all about fasting! Far from it — his ministry was a time when people began to experience in a new way the abundance and generosity of God's Kingdom. Jesus was known as the one who loved parties and got a reputation for enjoying a drink — not like the austere figure of John the Baptist (Mark 2.18-22; Matthew 11.18-19). Jesus talked a lot about food and feasting: we'll be exploring some of those stories in this week's TFTD.

So should we be fasting in Lent? I think it makes sense to think about fasting as part of the wider ecology of feasting, experiencing God's abundance. It's a way of cultivating an attitude of mindfulness towards our food, if you like. Choosing to go without food (or treats!) as a temporary discipline reminds us that food is good — it's one of God's most basic gifts to us. It's a way of reminding ourselves of the distinction between what we need and what we want.

- It helps us to think about the social element of food — of what it means to share food with other people, who is included and who is left out. (Could you save the money you would have spent on a meal or a treat and make that a donation to somebody who hasn't got enough to eat?)
- You might like to focus on the fair-trade aspect of our food — where does it come from? who produces it? How well are they paid for their produce and their labour?
- Or (and these are not exclusive options) you might spread the circle wider and think about the environmental impact of our food: where does it come from? How much plastic packaging did it use? What's the carbon footprint of our food? Is Lent a good time to think about replacing one meat meal with a vegetarian option?

Above all, let's use Lent as a time to become more intensely aware of our food as a gift — a gift to be shared with love, a gift to be received with profound thankfulness. In Acts ch.2 we read about the first Christians combining discipline with celebration: *They followed a daily discipline of worship in the Temple followed by meals at home, every meal a celebration, exuberant and joyful, as they praised God.*

St Paul, in prison, wrote to thank the church in Philippi for sending him a gift — maybe something to supplement his meagre prison diet. He's really grateful — but

he's also learned something important by having to do without: *I've learned by now to be quite content whatever my circumstances. I'm just as happy with little as with much, with much as with little. I've found the recipe for being happy whether full or hungry, hand full or hands empty. Whatever I have, wherever I am, I can make it through anything in the One who makes me who I am.* [Philippians 4.11-13, *The Message*]

God bless,
Loveday



PS there will be a chance to talk through some of these issues in the LENT GROUP. There will be two groups, one meeting at St Philip & St James on Mondays at 7.30 pm and the other at Alderley Edge Methodist Church on Thursdays at 2.30 pm. Do come along if you can. Or if you can't come in person but would like the discussion notes, just let me know and I'll add you to the list.

LENT 1: FEASTING AND FASTING (Holy Habits chapter 14)

LENT 2: MORALITY TALES @ SPJ on Tuesday 15th March, 7.30 pm

LENT 3: PRAYER (Holy Habits chapter 11)

LENT 4: SERVICE (Holy Habits chapter 13)

LENT 5: BREAKING of BREAD (Holy Habits chapter 10)

PPS Some of you have asked us how you can donate to help people in Ukraine and neighbouring countries. The UK government has told us that they will match donations up to £20 million that are given via the Disasters Emergency Committee appeal. The Disasters Emergency Committee brings together 15 leading humanitarian charities (including Christian Aid) who can coordinate support in times of crisis.

Disasters Emergency Committee appeal:

<https://www.dec.org.uk/appeal/ukraine-humanitarian-appeal>