

# Ash Wednesday, Old Testament, Year C

## THE LENTEN FAST

Isaiah 58:1-12

Ash Wednesday

Analysis by Peter Keyel

1Shout out, do not hold back! Lift up your voice like a trumpet! Announce to my people their rebellion, to the house of Jacob their sins. 2Yet day after day they seek me and delight to know my ways, as if they were a nation that practiced righteousness and did not forsake the ordinance of their God; they ask of me righteous judgments, they delight to draw near to God.

3“Why do we fast, but you do not see? Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?” Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day, and oppress all your workers. 4Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to strike with a wicked fist. Such fasting as you do today will not make your voice heard on high. 5Is such the fast that I choose, a day to humble oneself? Is it to bow down the head like a bulrush, and to lie in sackcloth and ashes? Will you call this a fast, a day acceptable to the Lord? 6Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? 7Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself

from your own kin?

8Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly; your vindicator shall go before you, the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard. 9Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer; you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am. If you remove the yoke from among you, the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil, 10if you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday. 11The Lord will guide you continually, and satisfy your needs in parched places, and make your bones strong; and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail. 12Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt; you shall raise up the foundations of many generations; you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in.

## **DIAGNOSIS: Our Fast Condemns Us**

### **Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem): Delighting to Draw Near to God**

At first glance, this pericope is clear: avoid twisting religiosity to our own selfish ends. Keep the law and all will be well (vv. 9b-10). Yet this insight is hardly new to the people of Isaiah's time, let alone Christians of today. It's peppered all through the Old Testament and repeated again here: "If you remove the yoke from among you, the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil, if you offer your food to the

hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted.” Clearly the Israelites (and we) know what to do. In fact, there’s pride in keeping the Law, not just for the benefits promised (“your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday”) but because they ought to delight drawing near to God and asking for righteous judgements. But for some reason, it’s not enough. God doesn’t see our outward signs of righteousness. All this Law-keeping isn’t working.

## **Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem): Works Don’t Remove Our Sin**

When we worry about Law-keeping, it’s easy to see a solution to the problem. Fast better, be more humble... God will see our works and it will make our voices heard on high. Yet the problem is that our works—whether it is fasting, being humble or pursuing justice—don’t get us out of the fact that we remain sinners. Despite our best intentions, we will still screw up. The fasting will leave us hungry and angry. The works don’t make us better people.

## **Step 3 Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem): Is Our Fast Acceptable to the LORD?**

Ultimately the Israelites get the righteous judgment they ask of God. Our works do not satisfy God, and the rhetorical question, “Will you call this a fast, a day acceptable to the Lord?” reveals the problem. Still worse, is the opening line of the chapter: “Announce to my people their rebellion, to the house of Jacob their sins.” Rebellion against God is a death sentence.

## **Prognosis: God's Fast Saves Us**

### **Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution): The Fast the LORD Chooses!**

We cannot escape God's rhetorical question nor his righteous judgment. However, God has chosen a different fast for us: "to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke?" God's fast is evident in the incarnation of Jesus Christ, where God's fast takes him to the cross, there to die and be raised. God has fasted from righteous judgment.

### **Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution): Grace Removes Our Sin**

This fast has surprising consequences for us sinners: "Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly; your vindicator shall go before you, the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard. Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer; you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am" A promise conditioned solely on God's fast, and not our ability or lack thereof to keep the fast. We no longer need works and no longer need to worry about Law-keeping.

### **Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution): Delighting to Draw Near to the Broken**

The consequences of this are liberating. We are now free to follow the LORD in fasting from righteous judgment. We can live in mercy, and share our bread with the hungry; bring the

homeless poor into our house; cover the naked when we see them, and not hide from our own kin. We will still screw up, but through mercy, repair breaches and restore communities.