

Lent with Ruth Burrows and Sister Wendy Beckett

WEEK FIVE: TRANSFORMED BY GRACE ON OUR LENTEN JOURNEY



Allowing our hearts to be free...

This week, Ruth Burrows helps us to contemplate the meaning and purpose of fasting, and Sister Wendy Beckett invites us to enter into the story of the raising of Lazarus.

The insights of both mystics deepen our understanding of what it means to live in this world with freedom and with hearts ultimately oriented towards our true homeland.

The fast of those who love Jesus, who have centred their lives on him, is precisely his absence as regards the senses. This is the only fast that matters in God's eyes. We can call it the fast of faith.

Faith is a fast, it is a refusal to put anything in the place of God, and an acceptance of the consequent sense of deprivation. Faith refuses to seek the sensible assurances our nature craves for, and insists on looking beyond, reaching out to him who cannot be savoured in this life. For one who has given their heart to our Lord there is a perennial fast while this life lasts.

It is in this context I think that we must look for Christian asceticism. Christian asceticism has its roots in love of Jesus, not in fear of the body and the world at large.

For the fast of faith to be real, for the Christian to maintain a hunger for God, a God who does not satisfy their senses, they must take care not so to encompass themselves with the good things of this world that their need for God is not experienced.

If their desire for God is genuine, and we must not confuse real desire with a feeling or emotion, then they will want to express it in concrete forms. Outward expressions strengthen the inner disposition. Hunger for God has to be worked for. It is a sustained act of choosing under the influence of grace.

There would be something incongruous in a person insisting that they want God, yet never depriving themselves of anything, always having everything they want when they want.

Ruth Burrows, *To Believe in Jesus*, 70-71.

For reflection...

- How does the idea of 'the fast of faith' sit in your mind and heart?
- What are some practical ways in which you can express your hunger for God?
- Do you find yourself resisting the idea of fasting in any way? Why?



Duccio di Buoninsegna, "The Raising of Lazarus"

What Jesus is revealing here is his power. To save his friend from dying of his sickness would have been miracle enough, we would think, but Jesus needed to go further. The time was fast coming when his apostles and friends would not see him in bodily form, when they would have to understand what it means to call him "my Lord and my God." This incomprehensible act of divine power was for their sake, to help them believe after the crucifixion, in the long years ahead.

It can have, for us, a personal meaning. If Lent is the time for looking into our lives and chasing what is wrong, then the great danger is despair. All too quickly we can think that there is nothing much we can do: "I'm just like that." We may want to be better, but feel a change of life is simply beyond us. Remember Lazarus was dead, decaying, buried. Yet Jesus could call him forth into a newness of life at will.

Never think that our own will alone can make significant changes. Habits and weaknesses bind us fast, like Lazarus in his tight swathings. But the whole point of being a Christian, and Lent repeats this again and again, is that it is not on ourselves that we rely. It is God who wills goodness for us and God who will achieve it in us. All we have to do is ask and, like the dead Lazarus, stand up in our mortal coffin and let God make everything different.