

the Church of England the spiritual mother of the Anglo-Saxon race—a nursing mother who cradled our fathers, whom her sons and daughters arise to call her blessed. Let me say in conclusion that the S. P. C. K. on the ground of gratitude for favours received, on the ground of her widespread usefulness, demands the sympathy, the prayers and the aid of all the members of that Church we love so well.

Appended report of collections taken up in aid of S. P. C. K. in the Deanery of Clarendon.

Bristol	\$5.45
Clarendon	5.54
Hull	3.25
Chelsea	1.12
	\$15.36

FASTING.

Sermon by the REV. SPENCER JONES, Rector of Batsford-with-Moreton.

‘Moreover, when ye fast, be not as the hypocrites, of a sad countenance: for they disfigure their faces, that they may appear unto men to fast. Verily, I say unto you, They have their reward.’—*St. Matt. vi. 16.*

WE have been keeping before our minds the idea of Power, and of all power as belonging unto God. In the light of this idea we examined the duty of Christian Almsgiving. This week we are to consider, in the same light, the exercise of Fasting, and our argument runs thus:—All power is of God. The human body is a form of God’s power. The absolute control of the body and right to it is God’s, Man’s temptation is to think the frame he wears is his, and so to make it minister to himself. Fasting is the Divinely ordained practice for undoing this habit, and fitting the human frame to minister to its Maker.

I. That fasting, whatever may be meant by the word, is a Christian duty, seems plain from our Lord’s words in His great Sermon on the Mount. There he ranks the exercise of fasting with those of prayer and almsgiving. Our Lord assumes that His hearers practise it on particular occasions. He does not say, ‘Fasting is what you ought to be always doing, and it is in this way that it should be done.’ Not so; but, ‘When ye fast,—whenever that comes about, it is in this way that you should do it. Fasting has been a custom, more or less, with all nations, and with the Jews—the chosen nation. Over and beyond the special instances we come upon in the lives of Daniel and David, public fasts were appointed and observed by the whole nation.

Now our Lord represents and fulfils, in His own person and teaching, the whole idea and intention of the Jewish people, and we find Him, at the commencement of His ministry, fasting in the wilderness for forty day. It is plain, then, that the duty and benefit of the practice were recognised by Him, and assumed without any argument, and He confined His teaching about it to the form and mode.

II. Now, what is fasting? In the Roman Church it means taking no food until the sun sets, and a distinction is carefully made between fasting and abstinence, ‘Shortly and roughly stated, abstinence means eating no meat, fasting means taking no breakfast.’ In other words, the theory of fasting in that communion would seem to be distinguished from the practice, the

former being, as we have stated it, going without food until the sun sets, while the actual rule, as now laid down, signifies no breakfast.

In the early Church fasting meant no flesh meat, and nothing that is derived from flesh, such as milk, butter, cheese, eggs. It further signified one meal only, and that not before midday.

Now, in our Prayer-book we find both words, fasting and abstinence; but whether they are intended to signify the same exercise not at first quite clear, inasmuch as, though days of fasting and days of abstinence are here mentioned separately, yet, when the Church goes into particulars, “she calls them all days of fasting or abstinence, without distinguishing between the one and the other.” It may be said to belong to the genius of the Anglican Communion to be more anxious about the spirit than about the letter, and so almost to avoid over-exactness. Nevertheless, words have a meaning now as of old, and the meaning that was of old attached to them must have some bearing upon their meaning now, unless some adequate reason can be, or is, advanced to show the contrary. And so, as regards fasting and abstinence, the words are calculated to excite in our minds certain ideas, and the word ‘fasting’ certainly implies more than the word ‘abstinence.’ On the whole, then, may we not say that fasting, for us, should mean ‘going without’ flesh meat for the day, and almost without food until midday? and that abstinence is a more vague and negative, and therefore less severe word, signifying taking less food of any or all kinds than is our wont?

But, of course, we shall here at once be reminded of the narrowness and literalness of this description. ‘Fasting,’ it may be said, ‘means denying ourselves in a great number of ways, and not merely in food. There are a hundred ways in which we may deny ourselves;’ and, of course, this is true. But will any one say not only that ‘fasting does not merely mean food,’ but that ‘fasting does not mean food?’ This point is more important than it seems; for there is some risk here of a leakage, through which the whole idea is in danger of evaporating. It is one of our devices, when we are asked to do something in particular, to reduce it to the general. A man is told to pray morning, midday, and the last thing at night, and he solemnly answers that we ought to pray at all times, which is nothing but subterfuge, and by which he seeks to hide the fact that he has no habits of prayer in his life. The duty of almsgiving here and now is urged upon him, and he answers that you must remember, before, perhaps, you became acquainted with him, how much money he has given away in the past; and, moreover, that there are many other ways of giving alms besides that of the bag in church. And thus he succeeds in keeping you talking, in gaining his point, and in losing his soul. So, also, may it not be with fasting? What means all our elaborate argumentation on this subject? Is it not often used to cover our own nakedness? We know, many of us, that we simply do not fast at any time, in any place, or in any way. We know, further, that this will not square with the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and so we saturate the solid fact in sophistry, until it is bleared and reduced out of all shape and beyond all recognition.

But, again, it may be urged by the heroic pietist, Suppose you fast, say on Friday. You give up your meat and you take fish. Is it not a fact that many who do this prefer fish to meat, and if so where is the denial? This, we may observe in passing, is only another way of saying that anything like a public fast or fasting which is sufficiently exact to be real is simply out of the question, for what is one man’s meat is another man’s poison; and what is perhaps very difficult to one taste may be easy to another. It would be well in households of this kind, I mean where the precept of fasting is not sufficiently exalted to be of any use, if the fasting dish could be permanently and continuously imposed, and the food that had been usual substituted on the fast-day itself. But, even in such exceptional cases as we have indicated, does not the mere command not to eat what is customary itself tend to discipline us? and is not that which is relegated to the shadowy land of everywhere or any time, practically destined to disappear altogether?

What, then, is the philosophy of this Christian exercise? It seems directed especially against two enemies—the flesh, as contrasted with the spirit, and the relaxed will. The Manicheans ran off in one direction, we are in danger of going off in another. They believed matter to be evil, and nought else; it could not therefore be from God. So it was that they excluded one whole section of creation from God. We, on the other hand, have come to regard sin as beginning and ending in our spiritual nature. But the truth lies in the mean, and what Holy Scripture speaks of as the ‘flesh’ is the occasion, the avenue, the provoking, aggravating, sustaining cause of moral and spiritual evil in the soul. It kindles and keeps alive the particular affections which, when consented to by the will, become our personal and actual sins. It follows, then, at once, that an external self-discipline, such as fasting, does enter into the means of our sanctification. And, as regards special days being imposed upon us, and not any day being left to our choice, it must be remembered that the Church encourages this self-discipline at all times, and what we have been speaking of is an addition, and not a substitution. ‘By all means,’ she seems to say, ‘fast at all times; do not cease from that.’ Mine is a more modest prescription; it is ‘fast sometimes.’

III. I am pleading, then, for what may be called Fasting in its aboriginal sense. It will scarcely be said that the present age is in any great danger of being literal in its obedience to Church commands and Church ordinances; and, in fact, at all times the world takes excellent care of secondary applications, and does full justice, at least in theory, to each and all of them. But our special danger seems to be want of directness and simplicity. The truth that we are required to be as little children is more urgent than we imagine. A hymn well known to all, and much loved by most, may occur to some of us in this connexion. When life first opens upon us, we are going to do everything some day; but, as experience teaches and trains us, we learn the blessing of doing something now, and leaving the future to profit by that as it may. So it is that in the matter of almsgiving, prayer, and fasting, the Church uses sharp instruments, cuts into our life with a keen edge, and dwells on what is special. She will not dishonour us with a general invitation. Special times, special ways, special materials. Such is her method. And we find that it fits us.

‘I do not ask to see
The distant scene;
One step enough for me.’