

Reading for the Friday after Ash Wednesday

20th February 2026

First reading

Isaiah 58:1-9a

‘Is not this the fast that I choose?’

Thus says the Lord God:

‘Cry aloud; do not hold back;

lift up your voice like a trumpet;

declare to my people their transgression, to the house of Jacob their sins.

Yet they seek me daily and delight to know my ways,

as if they were a nation that did righteousness

and did not forsake the judgement of their God;

they ask of me righteous judgements; they delight to draw near to God.

“Why have we fasted, and you see it not?

Why have we humbled ourselves, and you take no knowledge of it?”

Behold, in the day of your fast you seek your own pleasure, and oppress all your workers.

Behold, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to hit with a wicked fist.

Fasting like yours this day will not make your voice to be heard on high.

Is such the fast that I choose, a day for a person to humble himself?

Is it to bow down his head like a reed, and to spread sackcloth and ashes under him?

Will you call this a fast, and a day acceptable to the Lord?

‘Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of wickedness,

to undo the straps of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke?

Is it not to share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house;

when you see the naked, to cover him, and not to hide yourself from your own flesh?

Then shall your light break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up speedily;

your righteousness shall go before you;

the glory of the Lord shall be your rearguard.

Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer;

you shall cry, and he will say, “Here I am.” ’

Responsorial Psalm

Ps 51(50):3-4. 5-6a.18-19. R19b

A broken and humbled heart, you will not spurn, O God.

Have mercy on me, O God,

according to your merciful love;

according to your great compassion,

blot out my transgressions.

Wash me completely from my iniquity,

and cleanse me from my sin.

My transgressions, truly I know them;

my sin is always before me.

Against you, you alone, have I sinned;

what is evil in your sight I have done.

For in sacrifice you take no delight;

burnt offering from me would not please you.

My sacrifice to God, a broken spirit:

a broken and humbled heart,

you will not spurn, O God.

Gospel Acclamation

Cf. Amos 5:14

Glory and praise to you, O Christ.
Seek good, and not evil, that you may live;
and so the Lord will be with you.
Glory and praise to you, O Christ.

Gospel

Matthew 9:14-15

‘When the bridegroom is taken away from them, then they will fast.’

At that time: The disciples of John came to Jesus, saying, ‘Why do we and the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?’ And Jesus said to them, ‘Can the wedding guests mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them? The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast.’

Short reflection on the reading for today

We normally link the idea of “fasting” with food. To fast is to abstain from certain foods for a period of time. But in the first reading Isaiah defines fasting more broadly. He understands it as leaving aside all those ways of relating to people that damage and oppress them and replacing such ways of relating with working for justice on behalf of those in greatest need. Isaiah seems to be saying that fasting can never be separated from that other Jewish practice that we associate with Lent, almsgiving, the sharing of our resources with others.

Lent proposes the three great disciplines of prayer, fasting and almsgiving. Isaiah seems to say that all three stand or fall together. They are three expressions of one way of life. We cannot just choose while neglecting the other two. Fasting is saying “no” to something. Isaiah reminds us that such saying “no” is always with a view to saying “yes,” a “yes” that finds expression in greater service of our neighbour. Such service of others makes our prayer more acceptable to God. In the words of our first reading, “Cry, and the Lord will answer; call and he will say, “I am here”.