

In today's first reading, we hear the question "Why do we fast?" And in the Gospel, Jesus and His disciples are asked, "Why don't you fast?"

In the first reading, the question is asked in relation to being noticed ... in a sense, why do this if we aren't going to get a "gold star" or some sort of an award or recognition for doing it.

In the Gospel, the question is asked almost in the exact reverse orientation ... look at us, we're fasting ... why aren't you and your disciples more like us?

The word "fast" comes from an old Norse root that means "strong, firm, vigorous." That is, that it took strength to abstain from food, and self-control to not eat when you were hungry. Those who were physically weak needed to eat to regain their strength. Those who were weak-willed couldn't go for a few moments with hunger before they grabbed at food.

But it's certainly not in a spirit of "manliness" that we are called upon to fast. Our Lenten observances aren't some sort of extreme sport or game.

Rather, Isaiah gives us the secret to what we are to expect from fasting ... namely, that it is supposed to empty us of our own self-will, and point us toward generosity toward others.

By our standing firm against our own self-will and desires, fasting should open our eyes and our hearts to stand firm against injustice and oppression ... to go beyond our own needs and to recognize the needs of others ... the hungry, the homeless, the naked ... people whom we ignore because their condition makes us uncomfortable.

When we reach this point, Isaiah tells us:

*Then your light shall break forth like the dawn,
and your wound shall quickly be healed;
Your vindication shall go before you,
and the glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard.*

As we approach this altar to receive the Sacred Body and Blood, Soul and Divinity of Jesus Christ, let us pray for a spirit of perseverance ... so that we might be "strong, firm, and vigorous" in our efforts to quench our own self-will and desire ... through fasting ... but also that we might embody the fruits of fasting ... to go outside of ourself and our own desires ... to move beyond our comfort zone ... so that our actions in the world might show forth the light and love of Christ ... and show forth the vindication and the glory of God.