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by Pat Marrin

[View Author Profile](#)
[patrickjmarrin@gmail.com.](mailto:patrickjmarrin@gmail.com)

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This is the fast that I wish" (Isaiah 58:7)

Isa 58:1-9a; Matt 9:14-15

Jesus associates fasting with mourning and feasting with joy. His critics are stuck in a world of mourning and penance and do not recognize the joy of God's entry into the world and the nuptial union of human and divine natures. Jesus' Incarnation is our first glimpse of the New Creation, why God gave humanity the divine image and likeness in the beginning, and now, even after our faltering response, is renewing us

by divine mercy.

In the old dispensation where sin prevailed, the Law was given to limit self-destruction. Religion by fear brought order and imposed justice by the law of the talon. The Commandments were multiplied to cover every aspect of life, rules and rituals that produced righteousness but not joy, obedience but not wisdom.

Come to the wedding, Jesus proclaims. The water of purification has been turned into the wine of joy. The law gives way to the perfect freedom of love. God is not an angry judge, but a compassionate Father and a forgiving Mother. Life is not a funeral, but a wedding. Put on your festive garments and your dancing shoes. Come out of the shadows and welcome the light. Anxiety rules the night, but joy comes in the morning.

But, of course, Jesus knew the world had to take up God's invitation for it to come true. As he is here but still absent, so the kingdom is here but not yet. The fasting God wants is justice, our longing and working for the world to come. The Beatitudes describe a promise in progress, a courageous people already living in the future, hungry and thirsty for justice, a world leaning forward to where meekness, joy, mercy, purity of heart and freedom offer a better way to live than the sin and sorrow, selfishness and hurt that has reduced human existence to a game of survival instead of a celebration of beauty and delight.

Jesus knew that his vision would meet the blindness of those who did not know God or trust love to make a better world than the one they controlled. He would need to die like Abel, be sold like Joseph with his many-colored coat, be rejected like the Servant of Isaiah, be exiled like Jeremiah and Ezekiel and broken by suffering to satisfy the doubters and confirm the skeptics who say: It is better to despair than to be disappointed, to be dead than a fool.

Lent is our season to ponder these questions, to examine our hearts to find what we really believe. Our fast empties us of everything except God. To be human is to be haunted by unfinished prayers. The night is real, and the lonely night watches are an invitation to pray. Morning seems distant, but we can already hear in the first birdsong a distant cry: "Behold, the bridegroom cometh."

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