



Matthew 4:2

2 After fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry.

Our passage today finds Jesus in the desert. After the extraordinary scenes at his baptism the Holy Spirit has led Jesus out into the desert as his first act of public ministry. God's Messiah is here, God's anointed king, but instead of turning towards Jerusalem to take the fight up to Caesar, Jesus has been led out into the desert to do battle with the real king of this

world, the devil. But first, Jesus fasts. Which makes for quite a curious beginning doesn't it?

This is the only time in the gospels that Jesus is recorded as fasting, however it's very likely that he would have fasted with all the Jewish people during various religious holidays. Also, in Matthew 6, Jesus preaches about fasting and he says later on in the gospel that when he is gone his disciples (his followers) will fast.

So what is fasting and should we do it? In the bible fasting usually means going without food and drink for a period of time. It's usually associated with repentance, or mourning, or seeking guidance from God, or urgent prayer imploring God for his help in a particularly intense way. Fasting has the effect of humbling us and making us very conscious of our de-

pendency on God. It's a great way to focus our minds on him with the constant reminder of hunger in turn reminding us of God and the reason that we are fasting. Jesus seems to encourage fasting but never done in a public way. He says to never fast for outward show, in fact don't tell anyone, keep it between you and God.

And here is Jesus, right at the beginning of his ministry, withdrawing somewhere privately to fast. Now as usual there is a lot going on here but one thing is clear. We see Jesus fasting to prepare himself for what lies ahead – reminding himself of his dependency on, and love and obedience towards, the Father. He's preparing himself for his ministry and he's doing this through fasting.

But as we've come to expect with Matthew

there's even more going on here than this. You can see in our verse that Jesus fasted for 40 days and 40 nights in the desert. Now this could have just been a random length of time but more likely Jesus did it deliberately to take us back to when Moses fasted for the same amount of time in Exodus 34. Moses was a great leader of God's people who delivered them out of slavery in Egypt and led them to the Promised Land. Moses prophesied about Jesus in Deuteronomy 18 when he said to all of Israel that God would raise up someone like him from among them and that they must listen to him. And Jesus is like Moses – only greater. Jesus will save God's people, not out of slavery to the Egyptians, but out of slavery to Satan, sin and death. And he will lead them not to the Promised Land of Canaan where they'd stay for a time, but to the Promised Land of Heaven where they'll live forev-

er. And so these types of connections would have been rushing into the original readers minds when they read or heard that Jesus fasted for 40 days and 40 nights in the desert. And there are other significant references in the Old Testament to 40 days or 40 years that would have equally confirmed for the original audience that something hugely significant in the history of God's people was happening as Jesus fasted in the wilderness.

But should we fast? Well, as with all things God's word needs to be our guide, and when it comes to fasting it isn't prescriptive. Jesus seems to gently encourage it but Jesus himself was equally very far from being some self-depriving religious person. He ate at feasts, he drank wine and in his lifestyle, when the occasion afforded, he enjoyed all of God's good creation. And then there's Paul, who wrote

most of the New Testament; he never mentions fasting – but he was mainly writing to non-Jewish converts to Christianity which I suspect is most of us. On the other side of the coin we read in the book of Acts that church leaders would fast when making big decisions for their churches like choosing missionaries and church leaders.

So in the end, with the balance of Scripture, the decision to fast or not seems to be an area of Christian freedom. Why not have a think about it this morning? Especially perhaps if you are in a season of repentance, or mourning, or you have a big decision to make and need some wisdom for God, or if there's something really urgent and important that you are asking God in prayer? And obviously there are health considerations to take into account so if not complete abstinence from

food and drink (which can be dangerous), what about cutting it right back, or removing something else from your life for a period of time that is going to have a similar effect on humbling you and bringing to mind your utter dependency on God.

And when you're done thinking about fasting, spend some time praying to God. You might reflect over with him the way Jesus withdrew from the busyness of life to prepare his mind and heart for his ministry ahead. Perhaps you need to do this too right now? You might praise God that Jesus is the greater Moses, and that he came to save the world from Satan, sin and death and lead us to eternal life in heaven. Whatever it is that God has put on your heart this morning pray to him about it now.

And tomorrow the battle begins in earnest. I hope you can join me.