

STAND FIRM IN THE LORD

Reading St Paul's letter to the Philippians you are left in no doubt that this was a community for which he had a special fondness. There are no rebukes, as to the Corinthians, nor corrections of their beliefs. Instead he commends their faith, reminds them that their citizenship is in heaven, and bids them 'stand firm in the Lord.'

Standing firm isn't easy; all sorts of things get in the way, not least the temptations and distractions of our very secular society, which often take a rather patronising form: its OK to be religious, but don't take it too seriously. In this respect things haven't changed that much since St Paul wrote his letter and Jesus confronted the Pharisees. Luke records a rather unusual occurrence when some Pharisees went to Jesus, apparently as friends, warning him that Herod was out to kill him (*Luke 13.31–35*). The pharisees may posed as friends but Jesus is wary of their solicitude, and with good reason, because some Pharisees were actually in collusion with Herod. Jesus calls Herod a 'fox', a name he earned because of his sly ways. He was reluctant to take direct action against Jesus because of his popularity, and instead tried to drive him away by devious intimidation subtly disguised as friendship, and the Pharisees' warning was a prime example of this technique. Jesus knows that Herod will not succeed and that it will be in Jerusalem that he will meet his death.

More than once Jesus lamented over Jerusalem, 'the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it.' Jerusalem is the symbol of Israel to whom God had bound himself in a solemn covenant. It was believed that breaking a covenant brought a curse upon you, and that curse had fallen upon Israel in the past, for example in the exile to Babylon, and it is about to fall on them again. But each time, God ensured that some remained faithful to him, and the Christians at Philippi were part of the community that remained faithful .

One of the dangers facing the faithful in every age is false friendship, like Jesus received from the Pharisees. False friends try to use you to achieve their ends, while seeming to promote your interests. Paul warns the Philippians about those whose god is the belly; and their glory is in their shame, those whose minds are set on earthly things. The belly is full of what we consume, and those who make it their god define themselves by their appetites. Isn't this exactly what a consumer society does? It defines us by what we can buy, achieve, possess or earn. And does it not say that consumption is the way to happiness? – seemingly seeking our good, but actually more concern with achieving the aims of the producers for high sales and high rewards. And even in the wake of economic crisis, those largely responsible for it persist with incentives that simply reinforce the view that we are defined by what we can consume. Their glory, as St Paul said, is in their shame. We visit on ourselves the curse of breaking the covenant.

Citizens of heaven define themselves by their relationship with God, trying to remain faithful to the covenant that he made with Israel and re-made through Jesus. And the disciplines of Lent are given to us to help us in that endeavour. There are always false friends on hand to lead us down another path, but there is no short-circuiting the process. The devil came to Jesus in the wilderness as a false friend, and he will come to us.

1. Take the popular route – give the people what they want – turn these stones into bread. Be one of the crowd; work within the ways of the acquisitive society – the way that leads us into debt.

2. Put on a good show – throw yourself down from the temple and let the angels bear you up. Follow the cult of celebrity – don't let the atrophy of moral values worry you. But following this way, we become consumers of other peoples' lives – voyeurs – always spectators, never involved.

3. Seek worldly authority – be a strong leader and everyone will worship you. The way of power so easily locks us into a vicious cycle where it becomes impossible to admit mistakes. The result is inner corruption, a hollowing-out of character, listening only to your own voice.

The Lenten disciplines – prayer, study, fasting and almsgiving – take us down another path. In *Prayer* we listen to another voice, and begin a journey into freedom. In *Silence & Honey Cakes*, Rowan Williams says the free person is not the most powerful, nor the one with the most choices, but the one 'who freely does what he or she is without self-consciousness or self-assertion, without anxious fretting

about what would be more authentic.’ Prayer is a journey into the truth of who I am. Citizens of heaven are those who are free, who act along the line of their being unhindered by the cares of the world.

Study helps us to be rooted. We put ourselves under the authority of the Bible, absorbing its rhythm and its values, and gradually learn how to echo them. As we receive its truth we open ourselves to receive the promises of God – and we do so not just for ourselves, but so that we shall be able to give something to others. Attaining heaven is not a competition nor is it a solo pursuit; it is something we do together or not at all. To quote Rowan Williams again: ‘We love with God when and only when we are the conduit for God’s reconciling presence with the person next to us.’ It is service and humility that saves, not power.

Fasting is about refusing to define ourselves by what we can consume. When we give something up – food, drink, possessions, sex, ambition – we strengthen our will, we move away from a world that sees humans only as consumers. We also strengthen our ability to resist the relentless pressure to move on, to acquire more, to achieve more. All this activity masks an inner emptiness that only God can fill. Rowan Williams talks about pledging the body, rejecting the idea that our bodies are a kind of tool for the will to use in getting its entertainment and satisfaction, its sense of power and fulfilment. Fasting is about limiting our material desires so that we shall obtain our heart’s desire.

Almsgiving – giving not out of duty, but joyfully to those in need reminds us that we are not the centre of the world. Jesus taught us to

see him in those in need, so as we give to them we give to him. Rowan Williams again: 'the Gospel delivers us from any sort of competitive spirituality. We seek God in order to connect others to God, not in order to succeed at the expense of others.' By giving joyfully to others we learn to receive joyfully from God.

Lent reminds us that heaven is our destiny, and that it comes only as a gift. Lent also reminds us that we are in a moral and spiritual struggle against the temptations of the world, the solicitude of false friends. God is our true friend, and to be a citizen of heaven is to realise our heart's desire, to become fully our true selves. Therefore, my brothers and sisters, as St Paul urged the Philippians, stand firm in the Lord.

To him be the glory, now and for ever. Amen.