

Bishop Dr. Gebhard Fürst

“Is not this the sort of fast that pleases me: ...”

Isaiah 58 v. 6

The Easter way of repentance in the coronavirus age

Pastoral letter

to the parishes of the Diocese of Rottenburg-Stuttgart

for Lent 2021

Dear Sisters and Brothers,

In my letter for this year's Lenten period, I would like to propose to you a kind of fasting that fits particularly well with the coronavirus pandemic that we are all enduring at this time. I would like to draw your attention to an observance of fasting that is focused on people who are affected by the pandemic and suffering particularly from it.

We find this very different kind of fasting – as a helpful, caring solidarity with people in distress – in a prophetic proclamation to the people of Israel. The outstanding proponent of this understanding of fasting is the great prophet Isaiah, who formulates the essence of such a prophetic observance of fasting in impressive language:

Thus says the Lord Yahweh: “Is not this the sort of fast that pleases me: to break unjust fetters, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break all yokes? Is it not sharing your food with the hungry, and sheltering the homeless poor; if you see someone lacking clothes, to clothe him, and not to turn away from your own kin. (...) If you do away with the yoke, the clenched fist and malicious words, if you deprive yourself for the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted.” (cf. Isaiah 58, vv. 6-11)

“Is not this the sort of fast that pleases me:” – Thus says the Lord Yahweh (cf. Isaiah 58 v. 6)

Holy Scripture, then, knows another kind of fasting that differs from our usual observance. The unusual text in Isaiah reveals a surprising way of practising fasting: It is not about going without something, but acting with a view to the well-being of our neighbours. It is about paying attention to the well-being particularly of those who, in situations of distress, need help in their lives and healing in times as fractured as these.

Such people, who in different ways need help, care, support and solidarity, are found in manifold forms in the exceptional circumstances of the Covid age.

In the 40 days that lie ahead until the Easter festival, I invite you to take a **first step on the way to such fasting** by paying particular attention to our fellow humans who find themselves in threatening situations caused by the pandemic.

I think of the old, who are particularly vulnerable to injury and who feel isolated and overlooked. Each and every one of us should ask ourselves: How can I help?

I think of people who are concerned for their health and who are stricken by the fear of being infected. Each and every one of us should ask ourselves: How can I allay their fears and concerns?

I think of those weakened by illness and so particularly at risk. Each and every one of us should ask ourselves: Where could I be challenged?

I think of those who are unable to enjoy relationships with loved ones, friends and relatives at the moment and find themselves on their own. Each and every one of us should ask ourselves: How and where can I provide comfort and support?

I think of those who are being stretched beyond their physical and mental limits and are almost breaking under the enormous challenges: of carers and doctors, but also of mothers and fathers who have to combine their jobs and their work with looking after their children and those who are expected to live closely together as a family and so are stressed and go through unpleasant experiences, even violence. Each and every one of us should ask ourselves: How could I show them that I am with them and willing to help?

I think of those who have become sad, despondent and powerless and those who have lost their love of life. Each and every one of us should ask ourselves: What could I do in order to encourage them and help them get back on their feet.

I think of people who have lost friends and relatives to Covid and were unable to be with them as they died. Let us remember this: Physical closeness is a comfort and makes grief more bearable.

I think of people who are hardly able to bear the current situation any longer and are in despair. Each and every one of us should ask ourselves: Could I give hope by being alongside them?

Dear Sisters and Brothers, in this current pandemic we find plenty of such people in exceptional situations who, as Isaiah says, feel threatened and need help at this time.

Let us take a second step on the way to such fasting. Let us not just diagnose the suffering situations of people and observe them from a distance, but let us instead summon the strength to look away from ourselves in order to actually be close to others in their distressed situations in life.

Let us go further along this way of fasting by providing resources, succour and effective help to those who are beleaguered in different ways and oppressed by the burdens of the Covid age.

Dear Sisters and Brothers, we humans cannot shoulder alone the needs that are erupting and becoming visible in this time of pandemic. Each and every one of us, though, can play our own specific part – in whatever way we can – in bringing hope to the hopeless, whatever their situation. Together we can get through these times.

However surprising it may be, where people bring trust, courage and a little cheerfulness into these dark times through care and help, they in their own way are taking steps along a way of fasting.

Anyone who helps and lightens the darkness fasts as Isaiah urges. God is calling us: “Is not **THIS** the sort of fast that pleases me:” (Isaiah 58 v. 6).

If you act like this – God says in vivid words to Isaiah – your good deeds both large and small will bring light to the people. – “Then your light will blaze out like the dawn and **your wounds be quickly healed over.**” (Isaiah 58 v. 8) – “Then you will cry for help and Yahweh will answer; you will call and he will say, 'I am here.' ... and you will be **like a watered garden** (cf. Isaiah 58 v. 11b). You yourself will then be a spring of life.

Dear Sisters and Brothers, *the help you give* to the beleaguered and the oppressed of all kinds in this age will change you as well. In fasting as a salvific action for your neighbour, you are standing for the promise: “Your wounds” – **and which of us does not have wounds?!** – “Your wounds will be quickly healed over.” (Isaiah 58 v. 8).

Wherever we act to help in these strange times that are tearing apart the lives of so many people, there our actions will come back to heal us, too. We will find a meaning in life when we care for others. **This kind of fasting will thus lead to a new way of life, an Easter way of repentance, that will enable us to approach Easter, the festival of the Resurrection, with joy.**

We ourselves will then be able to write of our Easter way of repentance and recognise: “Is not this the sort of fast that pleases me:” (Isaiah 58 v. 6).

Rottenburg, 2 February,

Feast of the Presentation of the Lord – Candlemas.

Yours

Bishop Dr. Gebhard Fürst

Covid prayer

(in place of intercessory prayers)

Gracious God,

We are going through a time of uncertainty and fear:

We are concerned for loved ones.

We are afraid of being infected.

We are unsure how our world will change over these months.

We have already experienced deep changes to our usual life: We have to do without so many things we enjoy in order not to put other people at risk. This burdens us, and we hope that this time will soon pass.

All of this – our concerns, our hopes, our fears, we lay before You.

You said that You hear our prayers.

You said that we can cast our worries onto You.

You said that You would be with us every day until the end of the world – even in dark times.

We trust You.

We place the people we love in Your hands: Bless them and protect them.

And we beseech You to give us strength and confidence and to protect us at this time.

Amen.

Swiss Liturgical Institute, Ursula Schumacher