

## Deepening Discipleship

**A**lmost all of March falls within our season of Lent – traditionally a time for seeking to go deeper in our relationship with God. There are of course different ways to do this, not least using one of the many Lent courses, books or study groups on offer. Many of our churches make use of these materials or organise Lent activities. I do commend these to you.

I'm more ambivalent about recommending giving something up for Lent. If it is something you ought to give up anyway, then give it up altogether. If it is a matter of needing to reduce your consumption of something, then reduce it permanently – not just for Lent. Fasting is a different matter, and it isn't a matter of giving up chocolate or alcohol. Fasting is a major lifestyle change which you couldn't sustain permanently, but might be a real self-offering and blessing for a few weeks. It can be about food – maybe cutting out one meal a day, giving the money to poverty relief, and spending your mealtime in prayer or Bible reading. Or fasting can be a readjustment of other things – perhaps getting up an hour or two earlier than usual, or skipping television in the evening in



order to focus on Bible reading and prayer.

Which brings me to the three great spiritual disciplines at the heart of the Sermon on the Mount. The Sermon is recounted in Matthew chapters 5–7, but the three disciplines take up the first half of chapter 6. Prayer and fasting are there – fasting with Jesus' insistence that it should be done in secret rather than publicly. But prayer and fasting come second and third in Jesus' list of disciplines. You may know what comes first, and if you don't know, the answer may surprise you. In helping us to live a godly life, Jesus first draws attention to giving

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