

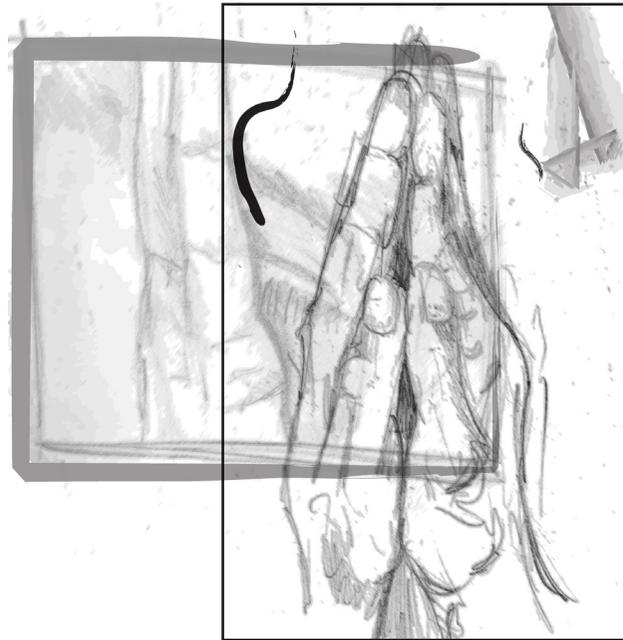
Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness . . . He fasted forty days and forty nights . . .

Matthew 4: 1-2

Fasting has nothing to do with hating or despising the world and its material goods, nor is it a form of punishing oneself. These are misconceptions. Fasting is one of the ways we deepen our awareness and openness to God. By refraining from some things – it might be a particular food or perhaps some form of entertainment – a person steps back from the usual distractions to give particular attention to God. An outward restraint can be the symbol of an inner attention, and a help towards it.

All the major faiths have encouraged fasting as a spiritual discipline, and the Christian faith is no exception. Jesus himself fasted in the desert as part of his preparation for facing his tempter. The early Christians observed fasts (Acts 13:2, 14: 23), and the Early Church Fathers commended the practice: 'Fasting is food for the soul, nourishment for the spirit' (Ambrose of Milan, c.339-97).

Fasting continues to be part of the spiritual discipline for Christians, and Anglican books of common prayer list days of fasting or abstinence. The most recent liturgical revisions of the Church of England have reaffirmed that the weekdays of Lent and every Friday in the year (except in Eastertide or on a major festival) are days of discipline and self-denial.



When Jesus fasted in the wilderness, he did so in order to clarify his relationship with God and the nature of his calling. To face inner temptation he needed to explore how he stood in relation to material needs and worldly power, and to affirm that his ultimate trust was in God: "One does not live by bread alone but by every word that comes from the mouth of God" (Matthew 4: 4).

Fasting has a particular significance in a world dominated by a culture of consumption. Today we are all encouraged to think of ourselves as 'consumers' or 'customers', as if the material things of creation had no other meaning than to be gobbled up by human beings. Fasting is a form of restraint in which we stand back to contemplate things as they are

in themselves, as they are in their own relationship to God, and not just as they exist for us. 'Fasting prevents us from identifying ourselves with the world in order merely to possess it, and enables us to see the world in a light coming from elsewhere. Then every creature, every thing, becomes an object of contemplation. Fasting puts between ourselves and the world a wondering and respectful distance' (Olivier Clément).

Real enjoyment of the world comes, not from possessing it or consuming it, but from a detached enjoyment of its goodness. Far from being a negative reaction to the material world, fasting is a positive affirmation of it. Fasting leads to thanksgiving. Indeed there is no effective act of thanksgiving – no Eucharist – without some form of self-restraint.

The discipline of fasting, in the wider sense of a whole disposition to self-restraint and simple living, has a contribution to make to the ecological crisis that faces our world.

It denotes a change in attitude towards creation, a radical change in our relation to God and to his creation, and indeed to our own vocation as human beings. We are called by God to be those who celebrate and give thanks for his creation, not those who descend upon it as if it were our prey.

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Fasting is always linked in the teaching of the Fathers with prayer and almsgiving, for it is about the re-establishment of a loving relationship with God, and it promotes a loving and creative sharing with one's neighbour. Fasting is not a harsh discipline to impose upon oneself, but a gentle self-possession that opens the heart to God and to the neighbour. It is also a shared discipline, a way in which the Church collectively marks particular seasons or events: Lent, Advent, Fridays – times of listening and attending together to the story of God and of his own self-giving for us in Christ.

Let us cherish fasting,
for fasting is the
great
safeguard
along with
prayer and
almsgiving.
They deliver human
beings
cherish
from death.

Athanasius of Alexandria (c.296-373)

FURTHER READING

Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline* (1989)

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