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Dear friends,

With Easter being early this year, no sooner do we appear to draw breathe after Christmas than Lent is upon us. Just as we loose so much of the appreciation of Christmas without an appreciation of Advent, so Easter becomes just a Spring festival without Lent. I had daffodils in my garden in full bloom on December 18th and a friend was telling me that day of primroses in bloom in her garden. It looks like the weather has become as confused as many people about the different times of the year. With supermarkets flying in cherries for mid-winter it is not surprising that something has gone of our appreciation of the yearly cycle. One meal can be like the next and one day can be no different from the others. Without an appreciation of the yearly cycle a sense of blandness enters into our lives.

Lent has traditionally been the time for both a spiritual stock-take and also spring clean. For many people this hangs on by the finger nails as a time to try and stop some kind of self-indulgence. The most popular is chocolate. How typical of our society that you take a luxury item that is not needed to sustain life and then try and build a significance out of attempting to do without it. As a symbol of a life-style that has become reflective, it is a good start. But for most people who attempt it, there is little more than some kind of vague spiritual memory that Lent is about being miserable, about having a sense of personal persecution and denial. Of course lent is so much more. It is a time for personal reflection. But that is more than just looking in the mirror and deciding on the need to loose a few pounds as you browse the holiday brochures and dream of exotic climes. Lent is a time for looking forward to the extraordinary reality believed by Christians about Easter and then realising our unworthiness of Jesus dying for us. It is a time for having acknowledged our unworthiness to look to improve ourselves. This improvement can be by both looking to develop

our own understanding and also to see how we can help others, following Jesus maxim to 'Love God and love our neighbour as ourselves'.

In looking to develop our own understanding, we will be running the lent courses with the Churches Together. As in previous years, these will be at the URC on Tuesday evenings. We will be following the excellent York course, produced annually by the office of the Archbishop of York. This year the theme is to look at the Lord's Prayer. Each session will include an audio presentation on the subject for the evening, followed by discussions in small groups. I know for some people these times together are one of the highlights of the year. Each session is linked, but also stands alone. If you have never been to one of these sessions I would urge you to use this Lent as a time to grow in understanding faith by attending. There is an excellent course handbook to help you.

We also have the booklet produced by the ministers in the village for the churches together. As we have been producing these booklets since 2002, we can become a little complacent about the significance of these collections of daily readings. With lent being early this year, the pressure was to complete these by Christmas. My thanks go to all the contributors and also to Kevin Williams from Fryerning P.C.C. for compiling them. Please attempt the daily discipline of reading them. It is best to set a specific time aside each day and try to follow them.

The older children at the Church of England Junior School will be following a booklet throughout Lent that gives them a daily task. Most of these tasks are related to helping others. At the New Year's Eve service we launched Hope 2008 as a churches together initiative and I spoke about our desire to express "a 1,000 hours of kindness" in our community. If our over fifty oldest juniors each undertake their positive actions for others in Lent we will be almost there! Perhaps we should all be personally looking to showing daily acts of kindness to others this Lent. That would be a discipline that would change us all and the community in which we live.

Yours in Christ, *Patrick*