

LENT

The season of Lent derives from the ancient Church's period of preparation for those who were to be baptized at the Easter Vigil. That preparation included instruction, fasting, repentance, prayers and special acts of devotion. Today, we use this same period and some of those same practices to prepare for Easter, the Feast of the Resurrection of Christ.

The word Lent comes from the old English word *lencten* (meaning lengthen), and refers to the lengthening of days at this time of year. For that reason, Lent is associated with spring. Just as the earth sees a rebirth and renewal of the plants and flowers during this season, so Lent is a time for Christians to consider our rebirth in baptism and engage in spiritual renewal as preparation for Easter.

Forty Days and Forty Nights

In early times Lent was quite short. In the 7th century forty days became the norm - six weeks of six days, and the four days from Ash Wednesday to the first Sunday of Lent. This does not include the Sundays: Sunday is never a fast day, being always seen as a celebration of the resurrection. This can give a tension in our Sunday services, between the penitence and preparation of Lent, which we need to reflect, and the rejoicing of Sundays.

- ? When people's main experience of Lent is a Sunday, how can you find the best balance between penitence and rejoicing?

A Time of Preparation

Preparation is something that is an integral part of the Church's worship. We find it in individual services (where the preparation is integrated

into the opening of the worship), applied to certain days (where there is provision for a vigil before saints' days with special readings) and also in entire seasons of the Church's Year, of which the longest is Lent.

The Link with Baptism

In the early Church baptism usually only took place on Easter Eve and Easter Day, with the bishop presiding over the service. Lent was the time in which the candidates concluded their preparation for this great event in their lives. Some even refused to wash during this period as a symbol of their cleansing when they were baptised!

Fasting and Abstinence

Lent has traditionally included a time of fasting - many people will 'give something up for Lent' as a token of not being bound or enslaved to material things. Fasting is part of the Bible story, and we fast for forty days not only because of Jesus' time in the wilderness but also following the example of the fasts of Moses and Elijah. Complete fasting is hard. To this day the monks at Sinai are usually only allowed to undertake the forty-day fast once during their lives.

Gradually over the centuries the fasting has become less rigorous:

- ◆ In early days the fast allowed only one meal a day, towards evening (somewhat akin to Ramadan), with no meat or eggs or dairy products.
- ◆ By the 15th century this meal was at noon, and a small evening meal was also taken.
- ◆ For most Christians today the fast is marked by a time of abstinence (from meat, alcohol or sweets, or from something 'addictive' like

TV). Often the time or money saved is used in a positive way, such as for charitable giving or for prayer.

- ◆ Other people might spend extra time in prayer, reading or study, and many churches run special study groups during Lent. Grove Booklet S83* examines what fasting might mean today.

Unfortunately the principal focus in modern society is on one possibly over-indulgent Pancake Day (Shrove Tuesday, the day before Ash Wednesday) - the day when originally all milk, eggs and butter were used up before the rigours of the Lenten fast.

- ? How might we encourage people to think positively about their Lenten discipline: what they might give up, what they might take up, whether this might lead to a more permanent change in lifestyle?

The Rhythm of Lent

During Lent, to mark the change of emphasis, there are noticeable alterations in worship. 'Alleluia' (Hebrew for 'Praise the Lord') and the 'Gloria' ('Glory to God') are removed from the liturgy. The hangings and vestments are the darker colours of Purple or Blue, or 'lenten array' (simple unbleached linen). Everything becomes more reflective until the victorious Resurrection when the colours brighten, the veils are removed, and the alleluias and praises break forth in joyous celebration.

On **Ash Wednesday**, as Lent begins, we are invited 'to struggle against everything that leads us away from love of God and neighbour' by engaging with repentance, fasting, prayer and works of love. Some people will make their confession, maybe the only time in the year

they do it. Or they may seek out ways of showing love and compassion to those around them, in a deeper way than at other times.

? For Jewish people the Day of Atonement is the holiest day of the year and is marked by prayer and a 25-hour fast. How could we encourage Ash Wednesday to become more significant for Christian people?

As Lent proceeds we begin to focus more and more on the cross, through which we are delivered from sin, until the fourth Sunday in Lent - 'Laetare Sunday' or Refreshment Sunday - when a relaxation from discipline was allowed and simnel cakes were eaten. Later those in domestic service were allowed time off to visit home (hence **Mothering Sunday**).

Lent culminates in **Holy Week** (which has its own leaflet in this series) when the final days of Jesus' earthly life are brought to the fore. Every day has a special association and many of the dramatic events are re-enacted in the services.

Music

Avoiding 'Alleluia's and music with a celebratory feel will help to make this season distinctive, and give a greater impact to Easter Day.

Other ideas might be:

- ♦ using a sung Kyrie in the act of penitence to encourage a more reflective confession
- ♦ singing a hymn or song based on Psalm 51 each week
- ♦ learning a musical setting of the Beatitudes, such as one used by the Taizé Community based on a Russian Orthodox chant
- ♦ using reflective music (eg by Margaret Rizza), either on CD or live.

All-Age Lent

Six weeks of penitence and breast-beating can be hard enough for adults but are doubly so for children. There are other themes particularly appropriate to Lent that might lend themselves to good all-age services in Lent.

- the excitement and cost of discipleship;
- the invitation to grow in holiness;
- exploration of a life of prayer;
- issues of justice and peace;
- almsgiving and Christian stewardship;
- the meaning of the Cross;
- issues arising from the parish Lent course.

For some churches Mothering Sunday is a particularly sensitive issue because of the pastoral situation of some families or individuals. Grove Booklet W185[†] explores some of the issues and suggests solutions, and a trawl of the web will locate themes that are less focused on the nuclear family.

- ? How could we encourage our young people to use and appreciate the extra reflectiveness and silence in Lent services?
- ? Could our all-age service next Lent be a week other than Mothering Sunday? If not, might there be ways we could handle the day more sensitively?

* *Fasting: a fresh look at an old discipline* (David Bolster & Anna de Lange, Grove Books 2002)

[†] *Mothering Sunday* (Em Coley, Grove Books 2005)

The Christian Year



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