

EXPLORING CHRISTIAN FAITH

No. 12

LENT, HOLY WEEK AND EASTER



AN INTRODUCTION TO
THE TRADITION AND RITES

INTRODUCTION

The Season of Lent (beginning with Ash Wednesday), Holy Week and Easter is of fundamental significance both in the Church and in our understanding of human life. For the pattern it presents holds before us the means whereby we can live life to the full in the way that God intended. It reminds us, in a startling way, that pain and loss are inevitable part of what it means to be human, and the integration of this reality in our lives is the means whereby we discover the fullness of our humanity.

A BRIEF HISTORY

In the early Church, Lent was a longer period than forty days and was used as the time of preparation and teaching for those who were to be baptised on Easter Morning. They were instructed in the faith they were about to profess in their Baptism. They turned from their old life to their new life in Christ, and, through repentance and confession, died to their old life and were renewed by the waters of Baptism.

Lent is the time of preparation for the great feast of Easter. For the forty days of Lent we prepare ourselves in heart and mind, by prayer and self-denial, to walk with Christ along the way of the Cross. In Holy Week, we follow Christ in our liturgies to his crucifixion and share in the sadness of the disciples, then in true joy we share in the mystery of his Resurrection, as we greet the Risen Christ at the Vigil Mass of Easter.

Lent is no less important for Christians today, as we too prepare for Easter. Traditionally it was kept by prayer, fasting and alms-giving and these still have their part to play in the life of the Church today. In Lent, we have an opportunity to make a special effort to do those things that should be a part of the everyday life of a Christian.

LENT

The word *Lent* means springtime. This word comes from the same root as *lengthen*, since daytime lengthens during Lent. The northern hemisphere turns towards the sun, the source of life, and winter turns into spring. In Hebrew, the word for repentance is *to turn*, like the turning of the sun, like the turning of soil before planting. 'Even now, says the Lord, turn to me.' (*Joel 2:12*)

The word sin means separation. We are called to turn from our separate selves, from our sin, to come together in community. We turn away from sin and death. Lent is, therefore, also an opportunity to use the *Sacrament of Reconciliation* (Confession) and we are encouraged to make our Confession before Easter.

PRAYER

We all have a need to pray more often. Lent is a time to set aside a little more time for prayer, quiet and bible study. It is a good idea in Lent to read a devotional book or to use some bible reading notes. Prayer is the language of the Christian; if we truly love God we will want to spend more time with him, sometimes simply being silent in his presence. For silence is not just about a lack of activity, with the radio on in the background. It is more about stilling the distractions of life, bringing them to God, and waiting on him. For this reason, it can often be frightening because we do not know what we might find. It is only God filling this space that can make it a creative experience.

FASTING

The preparation for Baptism was also accompanied by fasting. Jesus fasted forty days in the Wilderness after his Baptism and focused on his relationship with God. Christians have sought to deepen their own relationship by fasting from something that is important in their lives. Of course, in this over indulgent world there is no harm giving-up something for Lent. It is a time to eat more simply, and perhaps to give up some of those extra things that we eat but do not really need - and then to set aside the money we have saved to give to charity.

However, the importance is that we focus on God and not to turn this into a means of self-improvement. Fasting may involve realising ones addiction to particular forms of relationship, patterns of behaviour or attitude to others. It means we give up what prevents us from experiencing the reality of life, often far more difficult than giving up chocolate!

ALMS-GIVING

Works of mercy have always been part of the Christian discipline and calling. We cannot love God and ignore the fate of fellow human beings who are suffering through hunger, poverty or pain. We can use Lent boxes to give generously some of the many charities, which help those who suffer in our world.

MASS

Take the opportunity to go to an extra Mass during the week. Best of all make it the same time each week so that you remember to do it - there are Masses nearly every day either at the parish church or some other church.

HOLY WEEK AND EASTER

Holy Week, beginning on Palm Sunday, is the most important week in the Christian Year. It enables us to enter, dramatically, into Jesus' Passion, death and resurrection that mirror the pattern of human life.

The focus of *Palm Sunday* is the Solemn Procession into church, reflecting our Lord's entry into Jerusalem. On *Maundy Thursday* it is the Mass of the Last Supper and Watch when we re-enact the events of that evening, the Washing of the Disciples Feet and the Institution of the Eucharist. The church is then unceremoniously stripped of its beauty before we give time to being alone with Jesus in the *Watch of the Passion*, usually until midnight. The Liturgy of *Good Friday* enables us to be with him as he experiences his crucifixion as we share in the reading of the Passion and Venerate the Cross. These Rites, again, come from the earliest centuries of Christianity. In the evening we gather to enact the Burial of Christ and his journey into the realm of Death and Hades. The effect of his redemption works at both a conscious and unconscious level, affecting the whole cosmic order. The place of the Mother of God and of Jesus' friends and allies is also celebrated and reminds us of the importance of these 'lesser' figures of the Passion. This liturgy combines elements of Orthodox and Western rites. Finally, we gather in the cemetery to bless the graves.

All this is, of course, the prelude to the great *Vigil of the Resurrection*. This is the most important Liturgy of the Christian Year, the one for which we have been preparing throughout Lent. Traditionally it takes place at dawn on Easter Day. The faithful gather in darkness to herald the coming of light and celebrate this by lighting a new fire and light the great *Paschal (Easter) Candle*. We welcome that triumph of light over darkness as the Paschal Candle is processed into church followed by the faithful, each carrying their own candle: a great movement that begins to lighten the darkness. The Deacon (or priest) sings in celebration the *Exsultet*, the ancient hymn of praise and thanksgiving that light has, once more, triumphed over darkness. We are involved in the unfolding drama of God's invitation to life as we ponder Readings from the Old and New Testament and respond with the singing of psalms. We renew our own affirmation of this belief through our Baptismal Vows and share in the great Feast of the Eucharist – that foretaste of heaven. All this is done through means of the Liturgy, most parts of which date back to the very earliest days of the Christian Church. Of all the Church's celebrations, this is the most important to attend as it recalls us to the reality that life triumphs over all things. *Alleluia, Christ has risen and death is conquered*. This is our Faith!