

**‘For everything a season’:
Theology through the church year
Session 5: Lent – *Slow down!***



‘Welcome dear feast of Lent ... The Scriptures bid us fast;
the church says, now’ (*George Herbert, Lent*)

1. Historical Background

Lent: a ‘dependent feast’

The English word ‘Lent’ comes from the Anglo-Saxon ‘Lengten’, for ‘spring’. The season of Lent *Quadragesima* (Latin) *Tessarakoste* (Gk.) is referred to in the Council of Nicaea (AD 325 Canon 5). A feast to commemorate Christ’s death and resurrection had been kept since apostolic times, preceded by a single-day fast. Over time this developed into a forty-day period of preparation for the Paschal mystery.

Why forty days?

The number forty in scripture signifies a number of themes pertinent to Lent: penitence (Jonah 3:4), affliction (Gen 7:12), journeying (Num 14:34), prayer (1 Kings 19:8; Ex 34:28) and temptation (Luke 5:35). The forty days are set aside in particular to unite us with Christ’s experience in the wilderness. The length of the season has varied historically, depending on whether Saturdays, Sundays and the days of Holy Week are included in the forty days. In the West we now calculate the length of the season by counting forty days before the end of Holy Week, excluding Sundays, so that Lent begins on the sixth Wednesday before Easter (Ash Wednesday). In the East, the Lenten fast begins forty days before Palm Sunday, and includes Sundays.

By the time of Pope Gregory the Great (540-604), a ‘pre-Lenten’ season of three weeks—Septuagesima, Sexagesima and Quinquagesima—had emerged, providing a bridge between Epiphany and Lent. This has been referred to as ‘shrovetide’, a season of preparation for Lent culminating in ‘shrove Tuesday’ (‘shrove’ from the English ‘shrive’, meaning to be forgiven/absolved from sin). Indeed, Lent may have originally been connected more with Epiphany than Easter.

Ash Wednesday

Ashes are an ancient and biblical sign of penitence (Est. 4:1; Job 42:6; Jonah 3:5-6). Initially given to ‘public penitents’ who had committed grave sins, by the 11th century all Christians have been encouraged to receive the ‘sacramental’ ashes as a sign of mortality and repentance.

2. Twofold emphasis of Lent: baptism and repentance

From its earliest observance Lent has had a twofold emphasis: (1) the recalling of baptism and preparation for it; (2) an attitude of repentance, expressed through actions (fasting, almsgiving) and spiritual attitudes (prayer, study of scriptures). Over time the baptismal aspect of Lent has declined, but the penitential aspect has increased.

2.1 Repentance Hebrew *teshuva* to 'return'; Greek *metanoia* 'change of heart and mind'.

Penitence: an attitude of sorrow for sin, both the individual and social consequences of sin.

Fasting: Commanded by Christ (Matt. 9:15), who also taught that its purpose should be interior change and not outward show (Matt 6: 16-18). Traditional church teaching focused on abstaining from meat and at one time even animal products (eggs, dairy).

Acts of mercy: penance includes acts of reparation for sin, and 'seven corporal acts of mercy' were put forward by the medieval church: (1) Feeding the hungry; (2) Giving drink to the thirsty; (3) Clothing the destitute; (4) Housing the homeless; (5) Visiting the sick; (6) Supporting prisoners; (7) Burying the dead.

Liturgical observance: Lenten liturgy and church decoration is austere (no flowers or hangings); the Lenten colour is violet, ideally a different colour from Advent. Some churches use 'Lent array', made of unbleached linen. The 'alleluia' and 'Gloria' are omitted from the liturgy, and music should be restrained. The observance of the season takes precedence over saints days, although the feast of the annunciation (25th March) is observed when possible.

2.2 Baptismal regeneration

One understanding of baptism is to view it as the beginning of our 'new life' in Christ, a means of spiritual rebirth and regeneration. The link with Spring is relevant: as nature renews itself each spring, so during Lent we focus on spiritual growth, change and renewal, as we prepare to renew our baptismal vows at Easter. As such, the austerity of the season should never overshadow the joyful hope of new life in the resurrection.

Next talk: Sunday 18th March, 'Demands my life': passiontide, holy week and the drama of salvation

References:

Cobb, P. 'The history of the Christian year', in Jones, C. et al, *The Study of Liturgy* (SPCK, 1992), pp. 455-472

Gordon-Taylor, B. and Jones, S. *Celebrating Christ's Victory* (SPCK, 2009)

Miller, J. (various) at:

<https://www.catholicculture.org/culture/liturgicalyear/overviews/seasons/Lent/>