

Lent is observed in the forty days before Easter. The number forty is based on the days that Jesus spent in fasting and prayer in the wilderness after his baptism and before he began his ministry. It is calculated by omitting the six Sundays, which are *of* Lent but not technically *in* Lent. So traditional Lenten disciplines can be relaxed on the Sundays if so desired, although we try our best to 'tone down' our Sunday worship with useful little conventions like avoiding the great Easter word 'Alleluia,' and omitting the *Gloria in excelsis* at the beginning of the Eucharistic liturgy.

In the early Church, candidates for baptism at Easter prepared for it by a period of study, prayer and fasting. Also, those who had committed some grave sin and had been excluded from the Church used this time for fasting and penance before being readmitted to the Communion and fellowship of the Church at Easter. This history explains the central characteristics of Lent: self-examination, penitence, self-denial, prayer and study, all of which form an important part of the season's main thrust: preparation for the celebration of Easter.

In due course, whole congregations saw the benefit of joining the candidates for baptism (the catechumens) and the penitents by keeping these days as an annual spiritual time of renewal, a sort of springtime or 'spring clean' of the spirit, especially so that they would be ready to renew their baptismal promises along with the newly baptised at Easter. Hopefully, the disciplines formed during this season would lead to some new resolutions or practices for the Christian's whole life and not be undertaken as some sort of seasonal ego trip.

Lent is not so much about giving certain things up, or taking extra things on, useful though such disciplines can be. It is primarily a time to look at the whole of our Christian life, individually and corporately, and prayerfully assessing what changes need to be made, things to be repented of or better habits or practices to be adopted.

I can always remember my theology professor beginning an Ash Wednesday sermon by singing the praises of G. K. Chesterton, philosopher, lay theologian, writer (probably best known to the wider public for his Father Brown stories), and how he was a great apologist for Christianity, and had a deep Christian faith himself. The only problem with him was, said the professor, that he drank too much. I think his girth suggested that his eating habits followed the pattern of his drinking. When a lady asked him during the First World War, 'Why aren't you out at the Front?' Chesterton replied, 'If you look at me from the side you will see that I am.'

Lent is an exercise in growth, but not that kind of growth! It is about ensuring that we get the balance right in our Christian life, and that involves body, mind and spirit. Discipleship does require discipline in order that that we can identify and remove those things in our lives that hinder our growth in Christian faith and witness. Most of all it is about coming closer to Christ. It is all about him and if it is about us at all, it is about the looking at the quality of life we have as his followers, people who are called to be his body, his physical presence, his voice in the world.

The supreme symbol of our observance of Lent is the cross, the symbol of our Lord's own self-giving and suffering. We have an opportunity today to be 'ashed,' following the ancient custom of receiving the mark of the cross on our foreheads with the ashes of last year's palm crosses. Those of us who would like to receive the sign of ashes are reminded that it is merely an external, an outward sign of something that must be happening on the inside, in our hearts. What matters is that we wish to be more faithful to the gospel, more Christ-centred.

And so, in turning again to the Lord, we are summoned to love – to love him more and to be more aware of his love for us and for everyone. And another part of our observance and commitment today and throughout Lent is to prepare ourselves to celebrate the awesome events of Holy Week, the Lord's passion, and then to find true joy and renewal in the great miracle of Easter – those ultimate Christian celebrations of God's love and closeness to us, his people.

So let us heed the word of God that comes to us today through the prophet Joel: 'Come back to me with all your heart.' Or as St. Paul say, 'Be reconciled to God.' May our reception of the ashes of repentance, and of the sacrament of life be a sincere act of recommitment, individually and as a Christian community, that we turn again or turn more deeply to the Lord. When Easter comes may we be able to reaffirm our baptismal faith with a fresh heart and a new resolve, and so find ourselves further along the road as disciples of Christ, and more confidently and visibly reflect his presence and his love in our lives and for the sake of the world he loves so much.

A prayer for the beginning of Lent:

*Let us pray that this Lent we may turn again and more deeply to God and to one another.*

*God our Father, you know how often we try to go our own selfish ways. We ask you not to allow us to live and die for ourselves alone or to close our hearts to others. Help us to see ourselves and life itself as precious gifts from you. Make us receptive to your word and your ways that we may grow to share the mind and heart of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*