

bitesize Lent

WHAT DOES SHROVE TUESDAY MEAN?

Shrove Tuesday comes originally from the word *shrive* (meaning “absolve”). As the last day before the Lent, Shrove Tuesday was a day of self-examination where Christians would consider what sins they needed to repent of and what changes to their life or spiritual growth they would focus on during the fast.

While Shrove Tuesday was a day for the purification of the soul, it also had a practical significance too, from which would emerge our modern day tradition of pancakes. In preparation for Lent centuries ago, those observing the fast would use Shrove Tuesday to also purify and remove from their house any of the items that they were foregoing for the 40 days. Traditionally this included meat, fish, eggs, fats, milk and sugar. These ingredients combine easily to make pancake batter, hence Shrove Tuesday is now synonymous with the making and tossing of pancakes. The gorging on rich foods on Shrove Tuesday also gives us the alternative name of Mardi Gras (meaning ‘Fat Tuesday’ in French).

WHY IS ASH WEDNESDAY CALLED ASH WEDNESDAY?

Ash Wednesday begins Lent. The day gets its name from the traditional blessing of the ashes taken after the burning of Palm branches (or crosses made from Palm leaves) from the previous year’s Palm Sunday celebrations. The ashes are sprinkled on a person’s head or used to draw a cross on the forehead to mark the beginning of their Lenten fast. The drawing of a cross is often done while repeating the words “Repent and believe in the Gospel” (Mark 1:15) or “Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return” (Genesis 3:19).

What is Lent?

Lent is a time of repentance, fasting and preparation for the coming of Easter. It is a time of self-examination and reflection. In the early church, Lent began as a period of fasting and preparation for baptism by new converts and then became a time of penance by all Christians. Today, Christians focus on their relationship with God, growing as disciples and extending themselves, often choosing to give up something or to volunteer and give of themselves for others.

How long does Lent last?

Lent is a season of forty days, not counting Sundays, which begins on Ash Wednesday and ends on Holy Saturday. Lent comes from the Anglo Saxon word *lencten*, meaning “lengthen” and refers to the lengthening days of spring. The forty days represents the time Jesus spent in the wilderness, enduring the temptation of Satan and preparing to begin his ministry.

Sundays in Lent are not counted in the forty days because each Sunday represents a “mini-Easter”, where we celebrate Christ’s resurrection. On each Lord’s Day in Lent, while Lenten fasts continue, the reverent spirit of Lent is tempered with anticipation of the Resurrection on Easter Sunday.

BIBLICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF 40!

Lent recalls the forty days of our Lord’s fasting in the desert, which He undertook before entering into His public ministry. We read in the Gospel: “Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. He fasted for forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was hungry” (Mt. 4:1-2).

Like Moses, who fasted before receiving the tablets of the Law on Mount Sinai (cf. *Ex.34:28*) and Elijah's fast before meeting the Lord on Mount Horeb (cf. *1 Kings 19:8*), Jesus, too, through prayer and fasting, prepared Himself for the mission that lay before Him, marked at the start by a serious battle with the devil.

Throughout the Bible, the number 40 appears 146 times, typically reflecting a time of probation, testing or trial. In the Old Testament, the number 40 is referenced numerous times—for example, God sends 40 days and 40 nights of rain during the flood, Jonah powerfully warned ancient Ninevah, for forty days, that its destruction would come because of its many sins. The prophet Ezekiel laid on his right side for 40 days to symbolise Judah's sins (*Ez. 4:6*). Because of their sins after leaving Egypt, the children of Israel wandered in the wilderness for 40 years before a new generation was allowed to possess the Promised Land. Although the Bible has one Divine author, it was written by 40 writers over a span of about 1,600 years from 1513BC to about 98AD.

What do Catholics do during Lent?

Many Catholics will observe some level of fasting or abstinence from meat, fish, eggs, fats until Easter Sunday. Others will choose to give up just one item for Lent, more commonly a 'luxury' such as chocolate, meat or alcohol. It is also becoming increasingly common for people to give up other things in order to refocus their faith during this time; such as watching TV, going to the gym, even social media.

Many Christians also use Lent to study their Bibles and pray more intensively, making use of the many devotional books and courses now available to.

Practicing Lent Traditions

Here are some of the key elements of the Lenten season, along with some of the symbolism that comes with it. Many of these practices can be celebrated both individually and as a community:

Purple:

Like Advent, the official colour for Lent is purple. Usually, churches that celebrate Lent choose the deepest, darkest shade of purple for this special season. Purple is the colour of repentance for sins and also symbolises the state of our souls outside the light of Christ.

Confession:

As mentioned above, Lent is a penitential season of expressed sorrow and repentance. The 40 days are set aside to examine areas of recurring sin in our lives that prevent us from being conformed to God's Will. A good way to start an examination of conscience is by praying Psalm 139, verse 23-24: "Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my thoughts. See if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting."

Fasting and Prayer:

If done correctly, fasting can be a powerful time of renewing your relationship with God. Fasting can be found in both the Old Testament and the New, with Moses (*Exodus 34:28*; *Deuteronomy 9:9,18*), Elijah (*1 Kings 19:8*), and our Lord (*Matthew 4:2*) all participating in 40-day fasts. Fasting is a way of denying ourselves the excesses of life so that we might be more attuned to the Lord's voice. It is also a way of disciplining yourself, strengthening your "spiritual muscles" so to speak so that when temptations arise in life, you are already used to saying "no" to your desires. And finally, fasting is also a way of participating, in a small way, in the sufferings of Christ and can be particularly powerful when accompanied by prayer and confession.

Meditating on Christ's Sacrifice for Humankind:

In addition to periodic fasting and prayer, our scriptural meditations typically turn to the salvation offered to us through Christ's suffering. Read Old Testament Scriptures prophesying the suffering of Christ and the New Testament Gospel accounts.

Charity/Almsgiving:

A very important element of the Lenten season is becoming aware of not only the suffering and sacrifice of Christ but also to the suffering of others. Between now and Good Friday, choose one way you can increase your giving to those in need. It could be through extra financial offerings, donating goods you no longer need or use to charity, or increasing your personal time commitment to a ministry or cause close to your heart.

Adapted from:

www.40acts.org.uk

www.crosswalk.com