

Towards the Light



Living Lent

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Living Lent

Ashes to Light



Lent is a season of preparation for the celebration of Easter. In the early Church the annual feast of Easter was the time

when new members were initiated into the Christian community. Those preparing for baptism, known as 'catechumens', fasted for two days beforehand. Gradually this time of preparation lengthened until, by the fourth century, it had become set at forty days. Today the season begins when we are marked with the cross on Ash Wednesday and concludes at the commencement of the Easter Triduum on Holy Thursday.

As we are signed with ashes at the beginning of Lent, we ask for conversion from anything that keeps us away from the light of Christ in our lives. We remember also that we are Easter people – that good can come out of evil, that death gives way to new life, that there is hope in the midst of despair, out of ashes will come the Easter dawn.

The use of ashes stems from our Jewish heritage. The Hebrew scriptures refer to ashes in a number of different ways. Abraham says of himself: 'I am dust and ashes' (Genesis 18:27). Job tells his friends: 'Your maxims are proverbs of ashes' (Job 13:12). Ashes here suggest humility and human insignificance, as in the familiar 'ashes to ashes, dust to dust'. In the book of Numbers, we read that the ashes of a red heifer were used as a purification offering



to ritually cleanse the unclean (Numbers 19:9). Ashes were also used in scripture to express mourning and sorrow. When the city of Nineveh was confronted with its sin the king 'covered himself with sackcloth and sat in ashes' (Jonah 3:6).

The ritual use of ashes was carried over into Christian liturgy. The foreheads of public sinners, who entered the 'order of penitents' at the beginning of Lent, were marked with ashes. By the Middle Ages this practice extended to the entire community in acknowledgment of the fact that we are all sinners in need of God's forgiveness. Today we continue the Jewish understanding of ashes as a symbol of humility, purification and sorrow when we are marked with ashes on the first day of Lent as a sign of our willingness to cleanse our heart through prayer, fasting and self-denial.

The ritual incorporates three symbols: the ashes, sign of death and repentance; the cross, the paradox of life through death; the water, reminder of our baptism into Christ. These three together signify our willingness to embrace a way of life that will lead to Easter glory, to which we are committed through our baptism, and which demands dying to ourselves over and over again in order to live more deeply the new life offered by Christ.



Living Lent

Fasting for Enlightenment



For those who will be baptised at Easter, the catechumens, Lent is a period of intense preparation called the 'Period of Purification and Enlightenment'. In the light of God's word, they examine their lives and ask the entire Christian community to pray that whatever is weak and sinful within them may be eliminated and that whatever is good and holy may be affirmed. On the first Sunday of Lent the catechumens make a significant commitment in their journey to Easter at the Rite of Election. After this rite they are known as the elect. Lent is also a time of purification and enlightenment for all of us as we strive to radiate the love of Christ in our daily life.

The Church recommends three spiritual practices to assist us in our preparation for Easter: prayer, fasting and almsgiving. The practice of fasting was recommended by Christ's example and by his teaching. The *Didache*, a church order dating from the late first or early second century, mentions Wednesdays and Fridays as being regular fast days. Originally, fasting meant going without food completely for whole or part of the fast day. In current Catholic practice, fasting means having only one full meal on a day. Smaller quantities of food may be eaten at two other meals but no food should be consumed at any other time during the day.

The spirit of the law may invite us to extend the fast to things other than food – text messaging, surfing the net, gambling or gossiping. The minimum fasting requirements make most sense when they are combined with prayer and almsgiving. These age-old disciplines reflect our most fundamental concerns: our relationship with God (prayer), with our bodies (fasting) and with others (almsgiving).



In addition, the practice helps us imitate the example of Jesus who fasted for forty days in the desert in preparation for his ministry and provides a means of expressing our common repentance. The number forty has many Biblical references the forty days Moses spent on Mount Sinai with God (Exodus 24:18); the forty days and nights Elijah spent walking to Mount Horeb (1 Kings 19:8); the forty days and nights God sent rain in the great flood of Noah (Genesis 7:4); the forty years the Hebrew people wandered in the desert while traveling to the Promised Land (Numbers 14:33); the forty days Jonah in his prophecy of judgment gave the city of Nineveh in which to repent (Jonah 3:4).

The season of Lent was determined in the fifth century as a period of forty days from Ash Wednesday to Holy Thursday. This period does not include the Sundays. As the memorial day of the resurrection, Sunday is never a day of fasting.

The season of Lent is our annual invitation to grow in awareness of our spiritual hungers. Together with those preparing for baptism, we join in outward signs of our inner conversion.





As the elect – those preparing for baptism – draw closer to their Christian initiation at Easter the Christian family 'presents' them with two precious 'gifts': the Creed and the Our Father. These presentations remind the whole community of the central place of faith and prayer in their journey to the cross towards the light of Easter (*per crucem ad lucem*). On the third Sunday of Lent the Presentation of the Creed enlightens 'the vision of the elect with the sure light of faith' (RCIA 134).

The word *creed* comes from the Latin word *credo* – literally translated: 'I believe!' It is a communal statement which is intended to be proclaimed as one voice by all the people. In early Christianity, the Profession of Faith was primarily associated with baptism. It first became part of the Mass in the late fifth century as a safeguard against heresy.

It is sometimes called the 'symbol of faith', that is, the expression of belief by which Christians can be identified. The traditional creeds have a long history and their texts have been carefully worded over the course of many Church councils to express Christian faith accurately. The Creed, as it has come down to us, conveys the relational core of Christian faith.

At the Presentation of the Creed the priest prays over the elect: 'Lord, eternal source of light, justice, and truth, take under your



tender care your servants ... Purify them and make them holy; give them true knowledge, sure hope, and sound understanding ...' (RCIA 148). As we journey towards the light of Easter this will be a prayer for all our hearts.

If the Creed expresses the profession of our relationship with the Trinity and the Church then the Lenten practice of almsgiving is one way we *live* our faith in daily life. The word 'alms' is from the Old English word *ælmisse* and can be traced back to the Greek words *eleemosune*, 'compassion, pity,' and *eleos*, 'mercy'. Writing in the first half of the fifth century St Peter Chrysologus wrote these insightful words about the Lenten practices: 'Prayer, mercy and fasting – these three are one, and they give life to each other. Fasting is the soul of prayer, mercy is the lifeblood of fasting.'

In 2008 Pope Benedict XVI focused his Lenten Message on almsgiving. In the section below he makes the important connection between charity and stewardship: 'According to the teaching of the Gospel, we are not owners but rather administrators of the goods we possess: these, then, are not to be considered as our exclusive possession, but means through which the Lord calls each one of us to act as a steward of his providence for our neighbour.'



Living Lent

The Lenten Colour



In classical antiquity the dye that produced the colour purple was highly prized and sought after. It was obtained from the mucus secreted by the spiny dye-murex snail. It took some 12,000 shellfish to extract 1.5 grams of the pure dye. Rome, Egypt, and Persia all used purple as the royal colour. As purple dyes were rare and expensive; only the rich had access to them.

The Roman emperor Aurelian refused to let his wife buy a purple-dyed silk garment, as it cost its weight in gold! Members of the Roman senate wore a tunic with a purple stripe to indicate their position in society.

In the Book of Acts we read about a 'woman named Lydia, a worshipper of God,' who was listening to Paul. 'She was from the city of Thyatira and a dealer in purple cloth. The Lord opened her heart' and she, and her household, were baptised (Acts 16:14,15).

In Mark's Gospel on Passion Sunday the soldiers mock Jesus by wrapping him in 'in a purple cloak' and 'saluting him, "Hail, King of the Jews!"' (Mark 15:17).

Purple or violet is the prescribed liturgical colour for Lent. Purple is associated with mourning and so anticipates the pain



and suffering of the crucifixion; because it is the royal colour, it also celebrates Christ's resurrection and sovereignty. The use of purple vestments and hangings in Lent helps to evoke visually a mood of simplicity and austerity. On Passion Sunday, the Lenten purple is replaced by red, the colour traditionally associated with sacrifice, particularly the sacrifice of life.

The practice of using different colours for vestments and other liturgical objects during the various seasons of the church year seems to have begun in Jerusalem in the twelfth century. As the custom spread, usage varied considerably. The liturgical colours were standardised throughout the Church in the period after the Council of Trent in the mid-sixteenth century. This is basically the pattern followed in the Church today.

According to the current *General Instruction of the Roman Missal*, the purpose of the variety of colour of the sacred vestments is to express outwardly the specific character of the mysteries of faith being celebrated and to give a sense of the passage of the Christian life throughout the course of the liturgical year. (GIRM 2000 #345)





Along with fasting and almsgiving the third Lenten spiritual exercise is prayer. Often in the busyness of our daily life prayer can slip away.

However we can take great comfort from what we can learn in the scriptures: 'the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words' (Romans 8:26). Lent is a time to bring prayer and meditation into stronger focus in our lives. Teresa of Avila understood how central prayer is to our spiritual life: 'There is only one way to find God and that is by prayer. Those who point to any other way are deceiving you.'

In the second reading for the fifth Sunday of Lent we read that Jesus 'offered up prayers and supplications' (Hebrews 5:7-9). Indeed there are over seventeen references in the Gospels to Jesus praying: 'In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed' (Mark:35). In Luke's Gospel we read that Jesus 'was praying in a certain place, and after he had finished, one of his disciples said to him, 'Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples'' (Luke 11:1). The words that follow are a simple form of the prayer we call the Our Father, or the Lord's Prayer. In Matthew's Gospel we have the text that is closest to the prayer we use today. These words follow the Beatitudes (5:1-11) and Jesus' words that 'You are the light of the world ... let your light shine before others' (5:14,16).

The prayer that Jesus gave the disciples must have shocked their ears. In Jewish prayer God was addressed as *Adonai*, Lord: 'Praise the Lord, O Jerusalem' (Psalm 147:12). Jesus instead is addressing God with the



familial term of endearment – *Abba*, Daddy. There are ten pronouns in the prayer – our, thy, us – emphasising the deeply intimate and communal nature of the prayer. As a model of prayer the words challenge us to be bearers of God's light 'on earth as it is in heaven'. Pope John XXIII said: 'To know how to say the Our Father and to know how to put it into practice; this is the perfection of the Christian life'.

On the fifth Sunday of Lent the elect, with the whole community, celebrate the rite of the Presentation of the Lord's Prayer. The rite is another significant step for them, and all of us, in 'this process of purification and enlightenment' that extends 'over the course of the entire Lenten season' (RCIA 126).



Living Lent

Through the Cross to Light



As we near the end of Lent, we celebrate Passion (Palm) Sunday. At the beginning of the liturgy, we receive palms in memory of Christ's triumphal entry into Jerusalem.

The procession with palms on this day has a long history. It is mentioned by Egeria in her account of Holy Week in Jerusalem in the fourth century. In the Middle Ages the procession usually moved from one church to another and included a representation of Christ seated on a wooden donkey.

The procession of palms leads the faithful to the proclamation of the Passion of the Lord; it takes them from joyful acclamation to sober reflection. The procession is not just a procession for Christ but one with Christ. When the people join in the procession on Passion (Palm) Sunday, we see the Church on the move, acting as a single unit, acclaiming Christ with shouts of 'Hosanna'.

The procession with palms is a powerful symbol of the pilgrim Church, a Church on its way. We are moving towards the heavenly Jerusalem, yet we can only make the journey because it has already been made by Christ in his Passion. And Christ has done even more than making this journey for us; he now offers to make it with us.

No other sign so clearly symbolises this than the cross. This cross always reminds us that



Jesus experienced every human emotion that we do, even the utter despair of feeling completely abandoned as he was tortured and executed as a criminal. For many, in the time of the early Church, the cross was a symbol of confusion. It was the Roman Empire's method of repressing any rebellion or resistance to its power. It brought with it feelings of hatred, despair, pain, degradation and powerlessness. In the letter to the Corinthians Paul writes: 'For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling-block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ [is] the power of God and the wisdom of God.' (1 Corinthians 1:22-25; Second Sunday of Lent). Jesus' resurrection from the dead meant that the cross took on a completely new meaning for his followers. It became a symbol of victory over death and salvation from sin, a sign of both death and of love.

Besides being a primary symbol of Christianity, the cross is a central object in our liturgy. During Lent the cross will lead the procession of palms on Passion (Palm) Sunday, it will be the focus of Stations of the Cross devotions, and it will be venerated on Good Friday.

