

# The Season of Lent

## Origins of Lent

Lent observes the 40 days before Easter in the liturgical year, a period of solemn repentance and self-reflection in remembrance of Jesus. The origins of the Lenten observance are believed to come from the Council of Nicaea in AD 325; a 40-day fast was established, and it was agreed that the date of Easter would be “the Sunday following the first full moon after the vernal equinox.”<sup>1</sup> Later in AD 601, Pope Gregory established Lent as the 46 days before Easter, marked by 40 fasting days and 6 Sunday feasts.<sup>2</sup> A period of 40 days carries great significance in the Bible; Elijah’s 40 day journey to Mount Horeb, Moses remaining on Mount Sinai for 40 days to receive the Ten Commandments, and God calling down rain upon Noah’s ark for 40 days and 40 nights.<sup>3</sup> Though, Jesus’s 40 days of fasting, praying and resisting the Devil’s temptations in the desert is most commonly associated with the season of Lent.<sup>4</sup> The three core themes or “pillars” of Lent are prayer (spending more time with God), fasting (giving up something) and almsgiving (doing good for others). Fasting traditionally involved abstaining from wine, meat and other animal products, even consuming only one full meal each day.<sup>5</sup> In modern times, parishioners may choose to give up a worldly pleasure (alcohol, TV, sweets, etc.) to honor Jesus’s sacrifices, or spend more time in prayer and studying the gospel.<sup>6</sup>

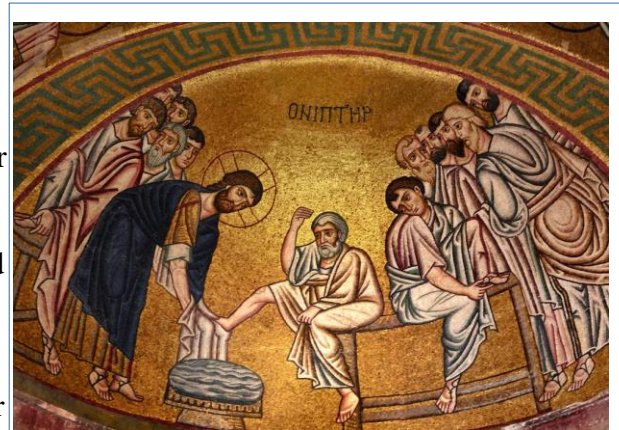


Figure 1: Jesus washing feet

## Pre-Lenten Traditions

The days proceeding Lent are often a final chance for merriment before the weeks of quiet retrospection and prayer. Countries across the globe revel in various diverse traditions at this time of year. Many nations indulge in the celebration of Carnival, whose name originates from the Latin “*carnem levare*” or “*carnelevarium*”, which translates to “removal of meat”, as it was historically the last opportunity to enjoy meats and rich foods before the Lenten fast.<sup>7</sup> Carnival may have derived some influence from the revelry during the festival of Saturnalia in ancient Rome; in 1464, Pope Paul II created an ancient Roman-inspired Carnival with races, games, masks, and a procession of candles called La Festa dei Moccoletti.<sup>8</sup> The Carnival tradition has spread from Rome all over the world and was further shaped by the culture of the nations it settled in.



Figure 2: Carnival in Venice

Venice is now the heart of Carnival in Italy, known for its

alluring masquerades. European colonists introduced the festival to Trinidad and Tobago where it began infused with Caribbean culture: the streets were filled with traditional songs, dancing and costumes.<sup>9</sup> In early days, the customary burning of cane sugar or “Cannes Brûlées”, symbolized rebellion of the enslaved peoples against the British.<sup>10</sup> Rio de Janeiro is home to the world’s largest Carnival and similarly to Trinidad and Tobago, the tradition was brought to Brazil by Portuguese settlers.<sup>11</sup> It has become a unique celebration marked by vibrant costumes, samba dancing, parades, joyful music and a playful atmosphere.<sup>12</sup>



Figure 3: Carnival in Trinidad

In the United States, the most famous Carnival celebration occurs in New Orleans the day before Lent begins. Known as Mardi Gras, or Fat Tuesday, the day is named for consumption of fatty, rich foods before the Lenten fast. Activities include masked balls, catching beads for good luck, parades with elaborate floats and parties in the streets.<sup>13</sup> There is also the King cake, a colorful ring-shaped cake with a tiny figurine of baby Jesus baked in; traditionally whoever gets Jesus in their slice has to buy the next cake.

The day before Ash Wednesday is also called Shrove Tuesday, named for the word “shrive” which means “to absolve from sin”.<sup>14</sup> In Anglo-Saxon nations, it is often celebrated by making pancakes to use up rich ingredients like eggs, sugar and milk; this practice stems from the days when Pope Gregory had prohibited partaking in meat and animal products during Lent.<sup>15</sup> In the town of Olney in Buckinghamshire, people say a woman in 1445 was cooking pancakes when she hear the bells calling parishioners for confession, so she ran to church still holding her frying pan.<sup>16</sup> Olney and other British towns now hold annual pancake races through their streets on Shrove Tuesday.<sup>17</sup>

In Croatia, their Pre-Lenten festivity is called Fasnik or Poklade, similar to Carnival in the custom of wearing masks and throwing parades.<sup>18</sup> It is also tradition to burn a puppet who takes on the responsibility of the troubles and sins of the previous year.<sup>19</sup> And in Lithuania, Shrove Tuesday is celebrated with the festival of Užgavėnės.<sup>20</sup> This holiday involves the burning of an effigy of winter called Morė, and a



Figure 4: Pancake day race

performative battle between Lašininis and Kanapinis, who represent winter and spring respectively, symbolizing the defeat of winter.<sup>21</sup>

Denmark’s holiday is called Fastelavn and is celebrated on the Sunday or Monday before Ash Wednesday.<sup>22</sup> Similar to modern trick-or-treating at Halloween, Danish children dress in costume and go door-to-door singing and begging for candy or traditional sweet buns called Fastelavnsboller.<sup>23</sup> Another custom is to fill a barrel with candle and hit it with sticks until it breaks; an image of a cat on the barrel hearkens back to the older practice of putting a black cat in the barrel and beating it until the barrel broke to ward away evil.<sup>24</sup>



Figure 5: Children celebrate Fastelavn

## Lent in the Church

In observation of the suffering and sacrifices of God’s son, the church will make various changes for the Lenten season. Tapestries and vestments will often be purple during the whole of Lent or Holy Week, a color that symbolizes mourning and penitence.<sup>25</sup> Purple dye was also historically difficult to produce, thus becoming synonymous with royalty. Jesus was referred to as King of the Jews at his birth and at his trial before Pilate when soldiers mockingly placed a purple robe on him.<sup>26</sup> Flowers are removed from the sanctuary, sometimes religious images and statues are covered up. In accordance with the solemn tone of the season, the word “Alleluia”, meaning “praise the Lord” in Hebrew, is excluded from the liturgy and hymns and returns at the joyful celebration of Easter.<sup>27</sup> Ash Wednesday heralds the start of Lent with the imposition of ashes in the sign of the cross on congregant’s foreheads. This symbolizes mortality, death and repentance, reminded us that we are dust and to dust we shall

return.<sup>28</sup> Traditionally, some churches will produce these ashes by burning the palms from the previous year's Palm Sunday.<sup>29</sup>



*Figure 6: Imposition of ashes*

### **Holy Week**

The final week in Lent leading up to Easter Sunday begins with Palm Sunday. Crowds waved palm branches to honor Jesus as he entered into Jerusalem, and so Christians wave palms during Sunday worship or weave them into crosses. This tradition possibly started as early as the late 4<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>30</sup> Maundy Thursday commemorates the Last Supper during which Jesus fed his disciples bread and wine and washed their feet.<sup>31</sup> “Maundy” stems from the Latin “mandatum” or “command”; Jesus’s command to his disciples on this occasion was to love one another.<sup>32</sup> In Mexico, Holy Thursday or “Jueves Santo” is celebrated by visiting seven churches to remember the apostles waiting in the Garden of Gethsemane while Jesus prayed.<sup>33</sup> This may be followed by a foot-washing ceremony and Holy Communion.<sup>34</sup> In the Spanish town of Verges, Maundy Thursday is marked by a procession with drums, a passion play depicting the life and death of Jesus, and the Dance of Death performed by skeletal figures.<sup>35</sup> And in Sweden, children dress as witches and knock on doors asking for sweets: Easter witches came from an old legend that on Maundy Thursday witches would fly to meet the Devil and the Swedes would light fires to scare them away.<sup>36</sup>

Good Friday commemorates the crucifixion and death of Jesus. Churches will clear the altar and use black dressings to represent darkness and sorrow.<sup>37</sup>

Christians in the Philippines may participate in the “pabasa” which is chanting of a Philipino epic poem about the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, called the Pasyon.<sup>38</sup> This occurs throughout Holy Week and usually ends on Good Friday. Some devotees will even hit themselves with whips or have themselves nailed to a cross in a reenactment of Jesus’s suffering, famously the Philipino region of Pampanga (this ritual is highly discouraged by religious



*Figure 7: Dance of Death*

leaders and public health officials).<sup>39</sup> In Bermuda, kites are flown on Good Friday to symbolize Christ's ascension.<sup>40</sup>

Holy Saturday is a day to remember the vigil for Jesus outside the tomb. Certain churches hold a candle-light Paschal Vigil between dusk on Saturday and sunrise on Easter morning.<sup>41</sup> Some towns in Mexico burn an effigy of Judas on this day to represent his betrayal.<sup>42</sup> In Poland, baskets are filled with hams, cakes, butter and cheese to be blessed by the local priest on Holy Saturday; this is called Święconka or "blessing of the Easter baskets".<sup>43</sup>

The season of Lent is observed by Christians across the world, though perhaps in very different ways. However you choose to celebrate this season, please do so safely and thoughtfully. Set some time aside in your busy schedules for prayer and contemplation in the word of God. Peace and blessings to all!



Figure 8: Polish Easter Baskets

## References

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