

# SHROVE TUESDAY AND ASH WEDNESDAY

Shrove Tuesday is the day immediately preceding Ash Wednesday (the beginning of Lent in Western churches). It occurs between February 2 and March 9, depending on the date of Easter. In our calendar, or Ordo for this year, Ash Wednesday falls on the 14<sup>th</sup> of February, and Easter, on the 31<sup>st</sup> of March. Thus, Shrove Tuesday this year falls on February 13<sup>th</sup>.

Shrove refers to the confession of sins as a preparation for Lent, a common practice in Europe in the Middle Ages. Although the day is sometimes still used for self-examination and introspection, Shrove Tuesday eventually acquired the character of a carnival or festival in many places and is often celebrated with parades (Mardi Gras), and raucous parties.

Pancake Day, or Shrove Tuesday, is the traditional feast day before the start of Lent on Ash Wednesday. Lent – the 40 days leading up to Easter – was traditionally a time of fasting and on Shrove Tuesday, Anglo-Saxon Christians went to confession and were “shriven” (absolved from their sins). A bell would be rung to call people to confession. This came to be called the “Pancake Bell” and is still rung today.

Shrove Tuesday always falls 47 days before Easter Sunday, so the date varies from year to year and falls between February 3 and March 9.

Shrove Tuesday was the last opportunity to use up eggs and fats before embarking on the Lenten fast and pancakes are the perfect way of using up these ingredients.

The pancake has a very long history and featured in cookery books as far back as 1439. The tradition of tossing or flipping them is almost as old:

*“And every man and maide doe take their turne, And tosse their Pancakes up for feare they burne.”*

## **Pasquil's Palin, 1619**

The ingredients for pancakes can be seen to symbolise four points of significance at this time of year:

Eggs ~ Creation

Flour ~ The staff of life

Salt ~ Wholesomeness

Milk ~ Purity

To make 8 or so pancakes you will need 8oz plain flour, 2 large eggs, 1 pint milk, salt.

Mix all together and whisk well. Leave to stand for 30 minutes. Heat a little oil in a frying pan, pour in enough batter to cover the base of the pan and let it cook until the base of the pancake has browned. Then shake the pan to loosen the pancake and flip the pancake over to brown the other side.

In the UK, pancake races form an important part of the Shrove Tuesday celebrations – an opportunity for large numbers of people, often in fancy dress, to race down streets tossing pancakes. The object of the race is to get to the finishing line first, carrying a frying pan with a cooked pancake in it and flipping the pancake as you run.

The most famous pancake race takes place at Olney in Buckinghamshire. According to tradition, in 1445 a woman of Olney heard the shriving bell while she was making pancakes and ran to the church in her apron, still clutching her frying pan.

The Olney pancake race is now world famous. Competitors have to be local housewives and they must wear an apron and a hat or scarf. Each contestant has a frying pan containing a hot pancake. She must toss it three times during the race. The first woman to complete the course and arrive at the church, serve her pancake to the bellringer and be kissed by him, is the winner.

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Shrove Tuesday also has many customs pertaining to food, as the final day before the austerity of the Lenten fast. Pancakes are traditional in a number of European countries because eggs, sugar, and fat, commonly forbidden during the Lenten fast, are used up so they will not go to waste. The day is known as Pancake Tuesday in many locations, notably here at our parish.

Ash Wednesday, in Western Christianity, is the first day of Lent, occurring six and a half weeks before Easter (between February 4 and March 11, depending on the date of Easter. This year it falls on the 14<sup>th</sup> of February). Ash Wednesday is a solemn reminder of human mortality and the need for reconciliation with God. It marks the beginning of the penitential Lenten season. It is commonly observed with ashes and fasting. Eastern Orthodox churches begin Lent on Clean Monday and therefore they do not observe Ash Wednesday.

In the early Christian church, the length of the Lenten observance varied, but eventually it began 6 weeks (42 days) before Easter. This provided only 36 days of fasting since Sundays are not included. In the 7th century, 4 days were added before the first Sunday in Lent in order to establish 40 fasting days, as a memorial of Jesus Christ's fast in the desert.

Historically, in preparation for their restoration to the sacrament of the Eucharist, penitents were sprinkled with ashes, dressed in sackcloth, and obliged to remain apart until they were reconciled with the Christian community on Maundy Thursday (March 28<sup>th</sup> this year). When these practices slowly fell into disuse (8<sup>th</sup> to 10<sup>th</sup> century), the beginning of the penitential season of Lent was gradually symbolized by placing ashes on the foreheads of the congregation.

Together with Good Friday, which marks the crucifixion of Jesus before Easter, Ash Wednesday was a day of fasting and abstinence, where traditionally only one full meal and no meat were to be consumed. (This practice is more relaxed now) Although Ash Wednesday is not a holy day of obligation, it is traditionally one of the most heavily attended non-Sunday masses of the liturgical year. It was the practice for penitents and grievous sinners to begin their period of public penance on the first day of Lent in preparation for their restoration to the sacrament of the Eucharist. They were obliged to remain apart until they were reconciled with the Christian community on Maundy Thursday.

In the modern Anglican Church, the ashes obtained by burning the palms used on the previous Palm Sunday are applied as a reminder of our mortality and the transitory nature of earthly pleasures. They are often applied with some variation of the words, "Remember O man, that thou art but dust, and to dust thou shalt return." Today, the ashes are imposed on the forehead in the shape of a cross on each worshipper on Ash Wednesday. The ashes are symbolic of our human mortality and the need for reconciliation with God.

**(Plagiarized shamelessly from several sources)**