

Tuesday Evening Lenten Series
A Journey through the Season of Lent
Session 2: A History of Lent & Holy Week through the Ages
Tuesday, March 10, 2020

When did Christians begin observing Lent and Holy Week?

- The word “Lent” is the shortened form of the Old English word *lencten* which meant spring, and may be related to the lengthening of days associated with springtime.
 - Latin: *Quadragesima*, meaning fortieth.
 - *Cuaresma* (Spanish) and *Carême* (French)
 - Greek: *Tessarakosti* (Τεσσαράκωστη)

- Why forty? The number 40 is important; it is the number that demarcates the great trial periods of the Bible
 - 40 days of the Great Flood
 - The ceremonies surrounding the embalming of Jacob (Israel) lasted 40 days (Genesis 50:3)
 - 40 days that Moses fasted while he was with God on Mt. Sinai
 - 40 years that the Israelites wandered in the wilderness (the length of a generation for the Israelites to create a people regenerated and prepared to claim their new land of promise)
 - 40 years that Saul reigned over Israel
 - 40 days that Jonah gave the city of Nineveh to repent
 - 40 days that Jesus fasted in the wilderness and was tempted by Satan
 - 40 days that Jesus spent following his Resurrection until his Ascension.

- The development of Lent as we know it happened gradually over time.
- While fasting before Easter seems to have been ancient and widespread, the length of that fast varied significantly from place to place and across generations.
 - In the latter half of the second century, for instance, Irenaeus of Lyons (in Gaul) and Tertullian (in North Africa) tell us that the preparatory fast lasted one or two days, or forty hours—commemorating what was believed to be the exact duration of Christ’s time in the tomb.
 - By the mid-third century, Dionysius of Alexandria speaks of a fast of up to six days practiced by the devout in his see;
 - Byzantine historian Socrates relates that the Christians of Rome at some point kept a fast of three weeks.
 - It is only following the Council of Nicæa in AD 325 did the length of Lent become fixed at forty days, and then only nominally.
 - Accordingly, it was assumed that the forty-day Lent that we encounter almost everywhere by the mid-fourth century must have been the result

of a gradual lengthening of a pre-Easter fast by adding days and weeks to the original one- or two-day observance.

- This lengthening, in turn, was thought necessary to make up for the waning zeal of the post-apostolic church and to provide a longer period of instruction for the increasing numbers of former pagans thronging to the font for Easter baptism. Such remained the standard theory for most of the twentieth century.
- In the pre-Nicene church (i.e., before AD 325), it was customary to fast prior to baptism, but the fasts described may not have been pre-paschal or related in any way to Lent.
 - The second-century Syrian church order known as the *Didache*, for example, commends “the baptizer, the one to be baptized, and any others that are able” to fast to prepare for the sacrament (7:4).
 - At around the same time, Justin, Martyr tells us that fasting was also enjoined on baptismal candidates in his community, and that existing members likewise prayed and fasted with them.
 - Early Egyptian Christians fasted for forty days after the Feast of Theophany (January 6).
 - As early as the mid-third century, historians begin to find references to a forty-day fasting period that is not specifically connected to Easter. The earliest of these is found in a series of Homilies on Leviticus composed by Origen, a third-century theologian from Alexandria, Egypt.
 - To dissuade Christians from observing the Jewish Day of Atonement, Origen argues that “we [Christians] have forty days dedicated to fasting; we have the fourth [Wednesday] and sixth day [Friday] of the week on which we regularly fast.”
 - A little more than a half-century later, the Egyptian collection of church laws (or, canons) known as the Canons of Hippolytus similarly indicates that Christians fast on “Wednesday, Friday, and the Forty,” and that anyone who fails to observe them “disobeys God who fasted on our behalf” (Canon 20).
- Research on Holy Week and the Triduum has shown that these periods were not always the cores of a gradually lengthening pre-Easter fast, but are actually separate periods to which the forty-day Lent has been joined or overlaps.
 - Athanasius of Alexandria’s Festal Letters sent annually to communicate, among other things, the date of Easter and its fast.

- In his first five letters (AD 329-333), Athanasius indicates that the “holy fast” spans only the six days before Pascha, perhaps revealing that Lent had not yet been observed in Egypt.
- When he introduces the forty-day Lent in his sixth letter (AD 334), Athanasius continues to note the beginning of the more ancient six-day fast of “the holy days of Pascha,” even though it is now part of the new six-week fast. This distinction becomes more pronounced as the six days before Easter develop liturgically into Holy Week and push Lent back so that it no longer overlaps.
- In the Byzantine vesper (evening prayer) hymns for the Friday before Holy Week, for example, when the cantor proclaims, “Having completed the forty days that bring profit to our soul...,” it is clear that Lent has ended by this point.
- On the following two days—Lazarus Saturday and Palm Sunday—the fasting rules are relaxed in this tradition and a new more rigorous fast is begun with Holy Week (known as “Great Week” in the Byzantine and other Eastern traditions).
- The same phenomenon is noted in Antioch where the late-fourth century church order *Apostolic Constitutions* (V.13.3-4) informs us that the more rigorous fast “of the Holy Week of Pascha” follows the fast of the forty days and its observance is given a different rationale (V.14.20).
- At around the same time John Chrysostom (*Homilies on Genesis*, 30.1-3) and Egeria (*Itinerarium* 30.1) also distinguish a “Great Week” from the rest of Lent and indicate that its liturgical character changes with respect to the preceding weeks.
- In the West, on the other hand, the distinction between Lent and the Triduum is admittedly not as evident. It is now recognized that, as a liturgical entity, the Triduum is a much later development than previously assumed. Accordingly, the ritual markers that would come to distinguish it from the rest of Lent—e.g., the unveiling of the statues and the singing of the Gloria on Maundy Thursday—emerge too late to tell us anything about the relationship between the two periods earlier in history.
- The Triduum as a theological concept can be seen as early as the third century (Origen, *Homilies on Exodus* 5.2) and it gains wide currency in the West with writers such as Ambrose and Augustine. Whatever the state of its liturgical development, by the fifth century Pope Leo I considers the forty days of Lent to conclude with Maundy Thursday (*Tractate* 39), and he conceives

of the Good Friday-Holy Saturday fast as a separate entity. It seems, therefore, that the forty days are not prolongations of the ancient Easter fasts (whether one, two, or six days long), but that they constitute a conceptually distinct unit that has been added to or overlaid on these early fasts.

- Easter baptisms did not become widespread until the mid-4th Century.

Egeria & Her Holy Week Experience

Read select passages from the handout.

The date of Easter

- In the early church, the feast of Easter was linked to the Jewish Passover and Feast of Unleavened Bread, as Christians believe that the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus occurred at the time of those observances.
- As early as Pope Sixtus I (r. AD 115-124), some Christians had set Easter to a Sunday in the lunar month of Nisan. To determine which lunar month was to be designated as Nisan, Christians relied on the Jewish community. But, by the late-3rd century some Christians began to express dissatisfaction with what they took to be the disorderly state of the Jewish calendar. They argued that contemporary Jews were identifying the wrong lunar month as the month of Nisan, choosing a month whose 14th day fell before the spring equinox.
- Christians, these thinkers argued, should abandon the custom of relying on Jewish informants and instead do their own computations to determine which month should be styled Nisan, setting Easter within this independently computed, Christian Nisan, which would always locate the festival after the equinox. They justified this break with tradition by arguing that it was in fact the contemporary Jewish calendar that had broken with tradition by ignoring the equinox, and that in former times the 14th of Nisan had never preceded the equinox. Others felt that the customary practice of reliance on the Jewish calendar should continue, even if the Jewish computations were in error from a Christian point of view.
- Eventually Easter was to be a Sunday in a lunar month chosen according to Christian criteria—in effect, a Christian Nisan—not in the month of Nisan as defined by Jews.
- Independence of the Jewish calendar and worldwide uniformity, were the only rules for Easter explicitly laid down by the Council of Nicæa. The Council did not seem to decree that Easter must fall on Sunday either.

- By endorsing the move to independent computations, the Council had separated the Easter computation from all dependence, positive or negative, on the Jewish calendar. The “Zonaras proviso,” the claim that Easter must always follow Nisan 14 in the Hebrew calendar, was not formulated until after some centuries. By that time, the accumulation of errors in the Julian solar and lunar calendars had made it the de facto state of affairs that Julian Easter always followed Hebrew Nisan 14.

Lent in the Middle Ages

- Medieval Lent was onerous, too difficult for us moderns to imagine—bread, beer (basically liquid bread), and vegetables for 40 days for all people.
- Ash Wednesday and Good Friday were “black fasts.” This means no food at all.
- Other days of Lent: no food until 3pm, the hour of Our Lord’s death. Water was allowed, and as was the case for the time due to sanitary concerns, watered-down beer and wine. After the advent of tea and coffee, these beverages were permitted.
- No animal meats or fats.
- No eggs.
- No dairy products (*lactinia*) – that is, eggs, milk, cheese, cream, butter, etc.
- Sundays were days of less liturgical discipline, but the fasting rules above remained . . .
- Beyond the daily penances, the Triduum was more severe than even the “Black Fast” mentioned earlier.
- The Good Friday fast began as early as sundown on Maundy Thursday, lasting through the noon hour on Holy Saturday—when the early Church performed the Easter Vigil.

Lent before Vatican II

- The Law of Abstinence forbids the use of flesh meat and the juice thereof (soup, etc.).
- Eggs, cheese, butter and seasonings of food are permitted.
- No more than one full meal a day, but does not forbid a small amount of food in the morning and in the evening.
- All Catholics seven years old and over are obliged to abstain.
- All Catholics from the completion of their twenty-first to the beginning of their sixtieth year, unless lawfully excused, are bound to fast.
- “Fasting and abstinence are prescribed in the United States on the Fridays of Lent, Holy Saturday forenoon (on all other days of Lent except Sundays fasting

is prescribed and meat is allowed once a day) . . . Whenever meat is permitted, fish may be taken at the same meal. A dispensation is granted to the laboring classes and their families on all days of fast and abstinence except Fridays, Ash Wednesday, Wednesday in Holy Week, Holy Saturday forenoon . . . When any member of such a family lawfully uses this privilege all the other members may avail themselves of it also, but those who fast may not eat meat more than once a day.” (from a Missal published in 1945)

Resources

Nicholas V. Russo, “The Early History of Lent,” <https://www.baylor.edu/content/services/document.php/193181.pdf>
<https://churchlifejournal.nd.edu/articles/a-closer-look-at-medieval-lents-toughness/>
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/First_Council_of_Nicaea
<https://www.learnreligions.com/lent-before-vatican-ii-3970752>