

Lent

Overview

Lent is closely associated with the seasonal change from winter to spring. The word Lent comes from an old Anglo-Saxon word for



springtime. The church color is Purple and runs from Ash Wednesday to Holy Thursday for a period of 40 days counted from the first Sunday of Lent until Holy Thursday.

Origins of Lent

Lent began as a Christian celebration as early as the 2nd century. In preparation for the holiest of seasons, the early church expected the return of Jesus. Lent actually evolved around the theme of baptism as this preparation could take years in the early church. By the 3rd century the celebrations and fasting were extended to all of Holy Week.

The early church also had an ancient process of adult catechumens with the emphasis on baptism during this period. In 1972 this process was revived with the introduction of the Rites of Christian Initiation for Adults (RCIA).

During the middle ages the process evolved more to what we have today. It is a time a penance and fasting with no meat on Fridays.

Lent themes and celebrations

The theme for Lent is penance. By the 4th century preparation for Baptism was joined with fasting and other penitential services prior

to the Easter season. Penitents were prepared for absolution through Baptism for their private and public sins and crimes.

Ash Wednesday officially opens Lent with an ancient ritual of penance and identified as penitents by dressing in sack cloth and covered with ashes. In those days a penance could last years or a life time.

Ashes from the burned palms of the previous year are placed on the foreheads of the parishioners. This began as an ancient practice of the Hebrew people and was adopted by the Christians as a sign of atonement for sins. Prior to being brought into the church during Holy Week, penitents covered themselves with ashes and stood outside of the church telling their sins. Eventually, the congregation – in support of them – began to place ashes on their own foreheads.

The day before Ash Wednesday is called Shrove Tuesday – coming from an Old English word “Shriven” for confession. This was due to the custom of receiving confession and absolution during Lent.

Very early in Christianity the discipline of fasting for 40 days became associated with Lent. If you read the bible carefully you will find this number of 40 being a very special one. Jesus fasted for 40 days in the desert and the Jews wandered through the desert for 40 years just to name a few occurrences.

Mardi Gras is a popular celebration which began as a last fling prior to the 40 days of fasting. It began with the French on what is sometimes called “fat Tuesday” – probably because they ate so much! Unfortunately this celebration has become more like an ancient pagan festival in some places.