

## **The Ancient Church – The evolution of Lent**

The earliest mentions of Lent in the history of the church

- Lent first mentioned by Irenaeus, Bishop of the Church (Gaul, now Lyons France), in a letter to Victor, Bishop of Rome, late in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century.
  - Irenaeus discusses the proper observance of Lent, which he learned from Polycarp, a devoted follower of the Apostle John.
- Additional evidence is found in early church disputes about the timing of Easter
  - Problem of different time for Easter was a problem because some would still be observing the season of Lent while others were joyfully welcoming Easter

Earliest observances of Lent - duration

- Earliest days – late 1<sup>st</sup> century
  - Evidence would suggest that the observance of Lent began as a 40 hour solemn period of fasting and prayer: from 12pm Friday until dawn on Easter
- By the time of the 3<sup>rd</sup> or 4<sup>th</sup> century, Lent was extended considerably to days instead of hours
  - Western Church: 6 weeks (did not count Sundays)
  - Eastern Church: 7 weeks (did not count Sat or Sun, except Sat before Easter)
  - Net observance was the same – 36 days, which was considered to be a “tithing” of days of the year to the LORD (nearly 10% of the year)
- By the 7<sup>th</sup> or 8<sup>th</sup> century, Lent was finally extended to 40 days by beginning with Ash Wednesday and the days before the First Sunday of Lent
  - THIS FORM IS THE FORM THAT WE PRACTICE TODAY

Why was Lent changed throughout the early centuries?

- The changing nature of the religious experience
  - Early years – Prior to Edict of Milan (313)
    - Original intention of Lent was the mourning of the death of Christ
      - Time period lasted as long as Jesus lay in the tomb
    - Persecutions, martyrdom and difficulties of Christian life were very real and were met with enthusiasm of early converts and 1<sup>st</sup> generation Christians
    - “When the Church was persecuted by Emperors and officials, and by law, then the Church was pure. Because then as a rule no one would venture to declare himself a Christian who was not so from stern inward conviction and moral necessity, when he knew that such declaration involved the flames, the cross, the lions, banishment, and imprisonment.”
  - After Emperor Constantine I (Constantine the Great)
    - Christianity becomes the “State Religion”
    - Christianity becomes an acceptable religion...and even more, the religion of the Emperor – if one wanted favor or status, conversion to Christianity now opened doors rather than led to death.
    - These changes led to two significant realities in the church regarding Lent:
      - No more persecutions and the length of time from the first generation Christians create a need to lengthen Lent to assure the purity of believers – in the absence of persecutions, prolonged asceticism was meant to be the path that led believers to strong faith.

- Secondly, the changing practices of receiving Communion eventually led to the annual reception of Holy Communion at Easter. This practice meant that the preparation time prior to Easter was critical.
- More prominently in the later centuries of this period, Lent became a preparation time for:
  - New members (Catechumens) and the preparation time prior to becoming baptized at Easter
    - Early Church baptized at any time, but this practice gave way to defined times of preparation
  - Penitents (notorious sinners) who were in a time of penitence and preparation for reception back into the Church after a period of waiting, sometimes for up to years!

### Practices of Lent

- Broad practices of the Church (and State) during the latter part of this period:
  - No celebration of Feasts of Martyrs or other Feast Days (except Annunciation)
  - Sermons preached daily to improve biblical understanding and to focus attention on the season
  - Postponement of prosecution of criminal actions that could lead to torture or corporal punishment
  - No marriages; no celebration of birthdays, amusements, plays, games, races, or any public social events
- Fasting
  - Fasting generally meant no sustenance for the entire day, with the end of the day being considered 3pm or (sometimes, and less often) the early evening after sunset
    - Upon breaking the fast, a wide variety of food was generally allowed, but moderation of food was encouraged
      - In areas where meat was specifically discouraged, those who could afford expensive and extravagant meals of fish, fruits, and other exotic foods were not considered to be meeting the spirit of Lent
  - If special needs of general weakness precluded fasting, this was understood but the person should still strive to achieve a spirit of turning toward God as a Lenten discipline.
    - A quote from John Chrysostom (349-407): “If therefore there be any here present who are hindered by bodily infirmity and cannot continue all the day fasting, I exhort them to have regard to the weakness of their bodies...For there are many ways besides abstinence from meat which will open to us the door of confidence towards God. He therefore that eats and cannot fast, let him give the more plentiful alms; let him be more fervent in his prayers; let him show the greater alacrity and readiness in hearing the divine oracle; let him be reconciled with his enemies, and for forget injuries, and cast all thoughts of revenge out of his mind. He that does these things will show forth the true fasting which the LORD chiefly requires.”

- Ancient intention of fasting:
  - Individual: practice moderation; devote more time to spiritual practices; abstain from unseemly and unseasonable amusements and pleasures
  - For others: the person fasting should forgive others, cast out revenge; and from the money saved from eating less, give to the poor.
- Fasting must result in a change in the spiritual life and the behavior of the person if it is of value.
  - Fasting does not have to be the physical food fasting only; can include fasting of pleasures, fasting of social events, fasting of fancy living, etc.

Information primarily obtained from the following source:

*Lent Past and Present: A Study of the Primitive Origin of Lent, Its Purpose and Usages*, by Hermann Lilienthal, M.A. (New York: Thomas Whittaker, 1895).

Material verified and supported by the following source:

*The History, Object, and Proper Observance of The Holy Season of Lent*, by The Rt. Rev. William Ingraham Kip, D.D., Bishop of California. (New York: Delisser & Proctor, 1859).