

Ash Wednesday, Lent and Holy Week

Lent

Lent comes from the Anglo-Saxon word “lencten,” which means “long” or “springtime.”

The season of Lent is commonly known as the forty-day period of preparation for Easter. Most scholars agree that Lent came into being by the fourth century, but have different views as to its origins. Some scholars believe that Lent grew out of a short fast in preparation for Easter. This fast commemorated the events of Good Friday and Holy Saturday. Other scholars believe that this short fast was the origin of Holy Week, but that Lent originated around the customs of baptism.

By the second century, documents tell of a period of preparation for baptism that included prayer, fasting and religious instruction. By the 3rd century Easter appeared as the preferred time to perform baptisms and after the Council of Nicaea in 325 CE, Easter baptisms became standard practice.

By the 4th century, Christian leaders started to draw strong parallels between baptism and the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and began to interpret baptism as a form of spiritual death and resurrection. Therefore, already baptized Christians also began to view Lent as a time of preparation for a renewal of baptism.

There is some debate about how the 40 days of Lent came to be. Some scholars think it originated in the churches in Egypt and was a fast practiced after Epiphany to model Jesus’ 40 days in the wilderness. At the end of the 40 days, people were baptized. Churches outside of Egypt shifted the 40 days of fasting to the 40 days preceding Easter.

By the 5th and 6th centuries, the rise in the number of infant baptisms diminished the importance of Lent as a season of study, fasting and prayer for baptism. The emphasis for Lent shifted to a time of fasting for all Christians as a way of preparing for Easter.

By the 7th and 8th centuries, Ash Wednesday appeared as the beginning of Lent because Sundays in Lent were not considered fast days and so four more days were added to Lent to match the 40 days Jesus’ spent in the wilderness.

In the early Middle Ages Lent was viewed as a season of repentance. Christians who admitted to serious wrongdoing were publicly disciplined and reincorporated into the community. On the first day of Lent they confessed their sins before the entire congregation. The priest sprinkled their heads with ashes and gave them a garment made of sackcloth to wear and they were required to do penance. They returned to church again on Maundy Thursday to participate in a ceremony of reconciliation and to take the Eucharist.

Between the 8th and 10th centuries public confessions declined in popularity. Instead people began to confess their sins privately to a priest. The several days before Lent became a popular time to confess (Shrovetide), and thus Lent became a time for general repentance.

Ash Wednesday

Ash Wednesday takes its name from the ceremony of imposing crosses made of ashes on the foreheads of penitents. By the 11th century, the imposition of ashes was not just for those who admitted wrongdoing, but for all who wanted to prepare themselves for Easter.

The ashes were usually made from the burning of the palm fronds that were used the previous year for Palm Sunday.

Holy Week

The first evidence of observing Holy Week dates back to the 3rd century. Certain Christian communities prepared for Easter by fasting during the week that preceded it. From the Monday after Palm Sunday through Maundy Thursday, they ate only bread, salt and water. On Good Friday and Holy Saturday, they abstained entirely from food.

By the 4th century, historical evidence points to Holy Week as a time to commemorate the events that led to Jesus' death and resurrection—Palm Sunday, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, Easter Vigil. Holy Week also inspired a number of devotional practices such as foot washing and folk customs like hot cross buns.

Easter, Origin of the Word

Most scholars agree that the word "Easter" comes from the name of the Anglo-Saxon goddess Eostre. The Anglo-Saxons named the month of April after her and they also used the word "eastre" for the season of spring.

Hot Cross Buns

Hot Cross Buns are a traditional Good Friday treat in England. In the 19th century, folk customs asserted that these small loaves of bread would neither mold nor decay. They had the power to cure intestinal disease. Some people hung hot cross buns in their homes all year long to protect the household against illness, lightning and fire.