

THE OBSERVATION AND PRACTICE OF LENT

Lent is a season in what is called the Liturgical Year celebrated as part of the worship life in the Christian religion. The season of Lent consists of the forty weekdays from Ash Wednesday until Easter. The dates of Lent change each year reflecting the varying date for Easter, which falls somewhere between March 22nd at the earliest and April 25th at the latest. The word "Lent" itself means spring.

Lent was originally only two days long. Over time those two days lengthened into a week, and then several weeks, until eventually the period of forty weekdays was adopted. Lent began as a time to consider the death of Christ in preparation for the celebration of Christ's resurrection at Easter. As Holy Week formed, and consideration of Christ's passion was focused in that single week, the preceding weeks were put to a different use, that of giving instruction to candidates for baptism and church membership, events which took place once a year on Easter Sunday. The practices we associate with Lent--fasting, prayer, study, humility, ashes, penitence, and the giving of alms--these are related to this use of Lent as a time of preparation for church membership. In our time people are baptized and received into church membership many times during the year, and this use of Lent has lost its focus and its cultural support.

We will approach Lent through the framework of the Church's Liturgical Year, and take the meaning of Lent and the particulars of its observation from that context. As we do this the meaning of Lent will focus on internal events that have to do with the work God does to bring us together into a more complete person, events which change the way we relate to ourselves so that we treat ourselves with greater understanding and compassion. In order to illustrate this we will use the image of a table, like a kitchen table. We are using this image as a metaphor to describe an internal environment which God works to create in each of us. God works to gather together all of the different parts of us, the many selves which make up who we are, and have them sit around this table and engage in table-talk as to how best live in any and every situation we face. Our tendency is to exclude what we consider sub-standard aspects of our life from participating around this table. This excluding denies us the input of contributors whose value we do not yet grasp, with the result that our perception is partial and our decision making is imbalanced.

God works to correct this condition, to make our relating more just, equitable and fair. The part of God we call Christ is born into us and takes up residence within us. Christ works to increase participation around our table by bringing together aspects of our self which have been excluded from it, or have not been available for inclusion around it. So in the first cycle of the Liturgical Year [the Seasons of Advent and Christmas and the Day of Epiphany] we find ourselves introduced to something about us that is unacceptable by our standards, discover that we are unable to rid ourselves of it, and come to the place of surrendering to it as being true of us. We come out in a place of realizing that we are acceptable to God with this unacceptable aspect of our life being part of who we are.

Lent is the season which begins the second cycle of the Liturgical Year [the Seasons of Lent and Easter and the Day of Pentecost]. In the second cycle of the Liturgical Year God's work is to disclose to us the reasons we oppose what has been introduced to us in the first cycle.

This is accomplished by means of a conflict between whatever in us opposes what has emerged in our awareness and Christ who is its advocate. The parts of us that oppose what has come to our awareness become active; they argue against what has emerged and pressure us to ignore it, while Christ remains steadfast in maintaining it in our awareness as a valid and acceptable part of us. This conflict takes place in our own experience, somewhere in the center of us. It may take the form of an argument which we actually hear in our own self-talk, like when we become conscious in an already-occurring argument taking place in our heads over something or with someone. Perhaps the conflict appears as the experience of being vaguely agitated and conflicted and in turmoil. In the Season of Lent we seek to experience this conflict as it unfolds and the invitation in Lent is to observe it and witness it. We seek to stay present to it and follow the argument if we hear one, or stay with the agitation to see how it will clarify itself for us. As we are able to pay attention we will find that our conflict becomes more focused and intensifies. Christ maintains the life of what we consider unacceptable, and the parts of us that consider it unacceptable push back. The discipline in Lent is to pay attention to the conflict as best we can. If we take on any of the traditional disciplines of Lent, they would be as a way to help us attend to this conflict as it unfolds in us.

The last week of Lent is Holy Week, which commemorates the success of whatever in us wants to keep us the way we have always been.

Christ and what has emerged in our awareness are overcome and we return to normal.

In the season of Easter we celebrate that the life of Christ is irrepressible and returns to life, bringing with it the part of us it has been the advocate for. During the Season of Easter we live with two things side-by-side: what has emerged in our awareness, and also the reasons we should not have it in our awareness. How to live with both of these in our awareness is the work that Christ takes us through during the Season of Easter.

We celebrate Lent in chronological time, as the forty weekdays between Ash Wednesday and Easter. However, we experience Lent in a different kind of time, what in Greek is called "kairos" time, event time. Thinking about the way we are describing Lent, Lent is any time the work we are describing comes to us. As such, Lent will come when the time is right, and stay until the work of the season comes to fruition.

Lent is a penitential season. The word penitent means—feeling or expressing remorse for one's misdeeds or sins. If we can take the heavy connotations off of the word, penitent is the right word. In Lent we discover that the way we live does not do justice to who we are. We miss the mark. The feeling that comes with this is remorse—deeply felt regret. There is no fault or blame; there is just the sobering awareness that we are not who we thought we were and have acted in ways that were not necessarily us at our finest. We have done and been the best we could; and, we have also missed the mark, and we regret that. I offer that this is a healthy way to be related to oneself, and a helpful way to be related to others.

During Lent the sanctuary reflects and validates the different elements of this penitential experience.

The sanctuary is bare--the experiences in Lent draw a person into a quieter, more reflective frame of mind than normal. Outward busyness is distracting when we have a need to be inward and reflective.

Purple is traditionally the penitential color, and is a visual way of expressing the mood of the season, which is very full and rich.

There are candles—light always represents the presence of God. God's presence is like light which shines into us to illumine what lies within.

When the candles are purple, the symbolism is that God's presence comes to us through the fullness we experience.

Fabrics used in Lent will be coarse or rough to the touch reminding us that the experiences in this season sometimes have a harsh or rough texture to them.

We are invited to pay attention to the movement of Christ within us by immersing ourselves in the symbolism, the worship and the practices of this Lenten season.

[Jim Robie, 2/22/12]