

The Lenten Season: Ash Wednesday through the Second Week of Lent

General Introduction

The origins of Lent are found in the desire of early Christians to mirror the forty-day fasts which are so prevalent throughout the Bible. Some of these include the fasting of Jesus after his baptism (Mt 4:2 and Lk 4:1-2), of Moses on Sinai (Ex. 34:28) and Elijah on his journey to Mount Horeb (1 Kings 19:8). The number forty is given further importance in that it mirrors the Israelite's forty years wandering in the desert.¹

The exact number of days for Lent varied in the early church. However by the fifth century the season seems to have become set: "Because there was no fasting on Sundays, an effort was made in the fifth century to increase the number of actual fastdays to forty."² This was done by placing Good Friday and Holy Saturday in the Lenten season, and moving up the beginning of Lent to what would become Ash Wednesday. This created a full forty day fasting season (Sundays are excluded from the count).

The beginning of the Lenten season is also tied up with the restoration of penitents in the early church. The practice of restoring the penitents during Lent is a major contributor to the penitential feel of the season. However, this penitential feel of Lent was also complimented by the preparation of the candidates for the sacraments of initiation at the Easter Vigil.³ The faithful joined the penitents and candidates in spiritual solidarity.

These two practices of restoring penitents and initiating new Christians, ultimately lead to the two-fold understanding of Lent as baptismal and penitential. The *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* from the Second Vatican Council affirms this two-fold Lenten focus: "Lent is marked by two themes, the baptismal and the penitential. By recalling or preparing for baptism and by repentance, this season disposes the faithful...to celebrate the paschal mystery. The baptismal and penitential aspects of Lent are to be given greater prominence in both the liturgy and liturgical catechesis. Hence, more use is to be made of the baptismal features proper to the Lenten liturgy."⁴

Both themes can be felt throughout Lent. The penitential nature of Lent is evident in the purple vestments, and the omission of the singing of the Gloria and alleluia. The Gloria it appears was never permitted in the Masses of Lent. The alleluia's omission in the West finds its roots in the 5th/6th century onwards. In the West, the alleluia before the Gospel was replaced by a tract. Interestingly, the alleluia was retained by the Greeks.⁵

One last general thing to note is that every Sunday and weekday of Lent has its own entrance antiphon, collect, prayer over the offerings, communion antiphon, prayer after Communion, and prayer over the people. Furthermore, even Sunday of Lent has its own

¹ Adam, 91.

² Ibid., 92.

³ Ibid., 93.

⁴ *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, §109.

⁵ Adam, 96-97.

Preface corresponding to the Gospel reading. The exception to this is the third, fourth, and fifth Sundays of Lent when Year B and C of the lectionary series are used instead of Year A.

Ash Wednesday – Violet

Ash Wednesday begins the season of Lent. In the early Church, on Ash Wednesday the penitents would don a penitential garment and have ashes sprinkled on them. This practice of wearing penitential garments and ashes has its roots in Old Testament penitential practices. Despite the disappearance of public ecclesiastical penance around the end of the first millennium, the rite of the sprinkling of ashes was retained and now is performed on all the faithful. Furthermore, the practice of using the ashes from the burning of the palm branches from Palm Sunday of the previous year appears to have its roots in the 12th century. The sprinkling of ashes is seen as a symbol of sorrow and penance, but also in hopeful anticipation of the resurrection.⁶

The readings for Ash Wednesday (Joel 2:12-18, 2 Cor 5:20-6:2 and Mt. 6:1-6, 16-18) all speak about penance and reconciliation. The entrance antiphon (Wis 11:24, 25, 27) also speaks to the need for repentance and God’s merciful judgment. The Opening Collect for Ash Wednesday attests the desire for our fasting to be a weapon against evil:

“Grant, O Lord, that we may begin with holy fasting
this campaign of Christian service,
so that, as we take up battle against spiritual evils,
we may be armed with weapons of self-restraint.
Through our Lord Jesus Christ...”⁷

This prayer reminds us that Christian living is not easy, and that we will be tempted to stray from the way of God. However, Christ through the Church gives us tools, such as fasting, by which we can defend ourselves against evil.

The prayer over the blessing of the ashes asks that God pour out His graces upon us this Lenten season and help us to be strong in our Lenten observance. The distribution of the ashes is then done with either the phrase: “Repent, and believe in the Gospel” or “Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.”⁸ Both serve as a reminder of our need to turn back towards God.

The First Sunday of Lent – Violet

The reading for the First Sunday of Lent (A: Mt 4:1-11; B: Mk 1:12-15; C: Lk 4:1-13) is about the temptation of Jesus in the desert. Thus, these readings call us to follow the example of Christ who was victorious over the temptations of the devil. The Opening Collect for the First Sunday of Lent attests to this desire to follow the example of Christ:

⁶ Ibid., 98.

⁷ *The Roman Missal*, “Ash Wednesday.”

⁸ Ibid., “Ash Wednesday.”

“Grant, almighty God,
through the yearly observances of holy Lent,
that we may grow in understanding
of the riches hidden in Christ
and by worthy conduct pursue their effects.
Through our Lord Jesus Christ...”⁹

This collect, speaks to Christ’s own struggle against sin and temptation, but also His ultimate victory over it. The Gospel reading is complimented by a Preface specific to the First Sunday of Lent:

“It is truly right and just, our duty and our salvation,
always and everywhere to give you thanks,
Lord, holy Father, almighty and eternal God,
through Christ our Lord.
By abstaining forty long days from earthly food,
he consecrated through his fast
the pattern of our Lenten observance
and, by overturning all the snares of the ancient serpent,
taught us to cast out the leaven of malice,
so that, celebrating worthily the Paschal Mystery,
we might pass over at last to the eternal paschal feast.
And so, with the company of Angels and Saints...”¹⁰

Here we are also reminded of the importance of fasting during Lent, and of our anticipation of the celebration of Easter.

The Second Sunday of Lent – Violet

The reading for the Second Sunday of Lent (A: Mt 17:1-9; B: Mk 9:2-10; C: Lk 9:28b-36) is an introduction to the paschal mystery. These readings are about the transfiguration of Jesus. The transfiguration shows that the cross and death are not the end of the story. Rather, they point to Christ’s passage into glory, which will be celebrated at Easter. Thus, these readings call us to see suffering as a passage into greater joy. The Opening Collect for the Second Sunday of Lent attests to this desire to follow the example of Christ:

“O God, who have commanded us
to listen to your beloved Son,
be pleased, we pray,
to nourish us inwardly by your word,
that, with spiritual sight made pure,
we may rejoice to behold your glory.

⁹ Ibid., “First Sunday of Lent.”

¹⁰ Ibid., “First Sunday of Lent.”

Through our Lord Jesus Christ...”¹¹

The Gospel reading is complimented by a Preface specific to the First Sunday of Lent:

“It is truly right and just, our duty and our salvation,
always and everywhere to give you thanks,
Lord, holy Father, almighty and eternal God,
through Christ our Lord.
For after he had told the disciples of his coming Death,
on the holy mountain he manifested to them his glory,
to show, even by the testimony of the law and the prophets,
that the Passion leads to the glory of the Resurrection.
And so, with the Powers of heaven...”¹²

In both the Gospel Reading and the Preface we are reminded that we are preparing for the Easter celebration. The suffering that we remember in Lent, both our own and that of Christ, will give way to the joyful celebration of the mystery of Christ’s resurrection at Easter.

(More to come...)

Sources

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This article was written by Nathan Chase, MDiv. and MA candidate at St. John’s University, Collegeville, MN, for field education requirements in the Office of Worship, Diocese of Saint Cloud.

¹¹ Ibid., “Second Sunday of Lent.”

¹² Ibid., “Second Sunday of Lent.”