

## LENTEN STUDIES 2013

Lent is a 46 day period from Ash Wednesday to Easter Saturday: (40 weekdays plus 6 Sundays). Lent is less meaningful in the Southern Hemisphere, even a misnomer 'Down Under.' Lent is based on Northern Hemisphere planting and growing. The word is Old English for *Len(g)t*, the time when northern days start to *lengthen*, moving away from winter to spring. In Australia, the days are *shortening* and, nights are colder and crop growing slows down with autumn. Our Easter is not a time for spring lambs gambolling and flowers.

Easter is always celebrated on the Sunday after the first full moon in the Northern Spring, a moveable date. Easter can be from late February to April.

Why did Lent develop from the 40 plus days?

40 is a favourite biblical number. 40 days' rain fell on Noah's ark; Moses spent 40 days on Mount Sinai; the Israelites wandered for 40 years; Jonah gave Nineveh 40 days to repent; Jesus endured 40 days' fasting, wrestling with temptation in the wilderness; Jesus revealed himself to his friends for 40 days after his being raised; in the early Church, 40 days was the time given converts to make their intensive preparation for baptism. As a precaution against disease, ships suspected of carrying infection were 'quarantined,' for 40 days. So, Christians follow Jesus in his 40-day fast. Like him, we remember God's reliability, dependability and generosity in the provision of our every need by temporarily surrendering our enjoyment of food.

The "Forty-Hour Fast" is an attempt to understand the plight of our perpetually hungry and under-fed sisters and brothers. There is a side to fasting that *should be watched*; there is the contemporary cult of dieting and its pathologies such as anorexia prevalent in the wider culture. There is also the folk Christian practice of putting lollies in a jar as self-denial for Easter which may mean a later unholy pig-out. Just as Muslims defer marital relations in *Ramadan*, Christians try to defer marriage in *Lent*.

Story: A dear soul had never stayed in an hotel before. She rang room service to claim she could not get out as the room had no door. "There must be a door," claimed the front desk. "There's a door to the bathroom, and a door I did not try because, hanging from its handle is a card saying "Do Not Disturb."

Lent is the challenge for us to *disturb ourselves* and be changed.

It is a time of undergoing training in desert conditions for warfare against the self.

It is a time of self-discipline, self-restraint, exercising self-control, penitential self-renewal.

It is a time to master temptations of the flesh, of the mind (pride, self-righteousness).

It is a time to get the fat out of our lives and the right things in.

It is a time to probe our human state: where are we as we tend to perfection?

It is a time to heed a call to be better, to get right the little ordinary things within ourselves.

It is a reminder of our failure to hit the mark. How closely do our minds conform to Christ's?

It is a time to be awakened to any unhealthy obsessions to tame them.

It is a time to dismantle roadblocks and blockages that prevent Christ's spirit acting freely in us, any nasty habits that mar our likeness to Jesus.

It is a time to find new harmony in relationships which may have cooled or grown stale.

It is a time to be easier to live with and much nicer to know.

It is a secret time between your God and you; no one except God must know your abstentions and religious exercises.

As well as prayer and acts of compassion, Lent looks for *fasting/renunciation*. In earlier Northern climes, Lent fell at the time of year when very little grew. All animals, other than treasured breeding stock, had been butchered before the onset of winter. There was very little salted meat and food-stuffs remaining. In Northern Europe, most vegetables and fruit were out of season. Thus, there grew the idea of fasting from food and abstaining from meat, 'tightening of belts,' as a *holy* necessity. In countries like Elizabeth I's England, fish became a substitute for meat as much for economic reasons as for religious; after the defeat of the Armada in 1588, she needed fishing jobs for the laid-off sailors, so banned flesh-meats on fast-days in favour of fish.

Biblical *fasting* in the Book of Judges was ordered after a defeat (Judges 20:26). The next day, Israel was victorious.

The people of Nineveh fasted in wheat-bag/sack-cloth and threw handfuls of ash upon their heads at Jonah's dire predictions (Jonah 3:5). The Ninevites knew they were dead meat unless they showed repentance, everyone from king to commoner; even the animals were starved to bellow to the heavens to make God heed. Fasting was urged in time of danger, national mourning.

A more modern idea for Lent is not to give up but *to add on* something. It is a time to get things done rather than simply as a time to do without something; we could use it as a time to attain rather than to abstain and refrain. This could mean to take on added acts of prayer, increased generosity or charitable offerings, more frequent church-going, visits to frail aged/shut-ins, to take up a daily health walk; as teachers in class, take on something more here, realising that *Christianity is caught as much as taught*. Then, make it a permanent change by keeping it up for the next 46 weeks of the year!

The eve of Ash Wednesday is **Shrove Tuesday**. It can be as early as 2 February or as late as 8 March. The old word for having sins forgiven was to be 'shrived' in church at the sound of the 'Shriving Bell.' Having confessed to the village priest, to show that they really intended to change their ways, people cleaned their larders of all rich, sweet, fatty foods, made these into pancakes and ate them. In some villages, there were pancake races where people ran tossing pancakes to show that they had cleaned out the larder. Lent would be a sincere fasting time until hot cross buns broke the fast on Good Friday. In French countries, the day is called Mardi Gras, 'Fat Tuesday.' In formerly Latin America, the day is 'carnem-levare/Carnival,' 'Goodbye to the flesh,' a day to let off steam in extravagant parades of exotic costumes, a last showing of flesh before the sober Lenten cover-up. When the

pancakes are done with, the last year's palms from **Palm Sunday**, now dried and brittle, are burned and powdered for ash. Why palms? Jesus rode into Jerusalem on the first Palm Sunday to give the city a final chance to swing in behind God's way. The excited people cut down and strewed palms before his progress. The palm has become a Christian symbol of victory over hardship and martyrdom.

Hot cross buns remind us of the crucifixion and should *only be eaten* on Good Friday. The egg-shaped bun resembles Christ's tomb with cross; it shows the hatching from death's darkness to light. The spiced dough reminds us of those sweet-smelling spices wrapped into Jesus' burial cloths.

The day after Shrove Tuesday, **Ash Wednesday**, people gather in church to receive a touch of ash on their foreheads, with words such as "Remember you are dust, and unto dust you shall return," "Turn from self and turn to Jesus," or "Repent and believe the Gospel." The touch of ash confronts us with our mortality. The best medical technology cannot change the statistic: one out of one will die. Scattering ashes was an ancient way of showing grief and mourning. The underlying message is, you can choose to die 'in Christ,' who once conquered death by being raised. We cannot change death, but we can change our life and how we live it; we can choose to turn from deathly pursuits to life-giving ones. We can choose to turn from annoying habits that 'deaden' us. Ashes are very real to Australians given the terrible bushfires that destroy so much; there is the threat of 'flash-to-ash' of modern warfare; there are the ashes of defeat in relationships or workplace contest; even all that Jesus had hoped for powdered into ash at his crucifixion.

The themes for the Sundays of Lent can be the Temptation; Transfiguration; Gathering people as does a mother hen; the Prodigal Son; anointing of Jesus' feet as preparation for his death; Passion or Palm Sunday, Jesus' entrance into Jerusalem. These aspects of Jesus' life are presented to offer an appreciation of what he did and an invitation to deeper commitment by Lent's ending. For example, Jesus was led into the wilderness to seek to know God's plan in his life through prayer and fasting, where he resisted the temptation to seek an easy way. Now the tempted one can strengthen us in our trials.

The fourth Sunday of Lent is also Mothering Sunday or Refreshment Sunday. Originally, it was a 'back to *Mother Church*' Sunday, from which grew family gatherings. This is not *Mother's Day*, an American invention from 1907. Before the days of legally enforced holidays, working children, especially apprentices and servants, went home on Mothering Sunday, taking Simnel cake (spiced cake with marzipan) as a gift.

**The Revd Walter McEntee**