

Lent*

Lent is the period of 40 days which comes before Easter in the Christian calendar. Beginning on Ash Wednesday, Lent is a season of reflection and preparation before the celebrations of Easter. By observing the 40 days of Lent, Christians replicate Jesus Christ's sacrifice and withdrawal into the desert for 40 days. Lent is marked by fasting, both from food and festivities.

Whereas Easter celebrates the resurrection of Jesus after his death on the cross, Lent recalls the events leading up to and including Jesus' crucifixion by Rome. This is believed to have taken place in Roman occupied Jerusalem.

The Christian churches that observe Lent in the 21st century (and not all do significantly) use it as a time for prayer and penance. Only a small number of people today fast for the whole of Lent, although some maintain the practice on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday. It is more common these days for believers to surrender a particular vice such as favourite foods or smoking. Whatever the sacrifice it is a reflection of Jesus' deprivation in the wilderness and a test of self-discipline.

Why 40 days?

40 is a significant number in Jewish-Christian scripture:

- In Genesis, the flood which destroyed the earth was brought about by 40 days and nights of rain.
- The Hebrews spent 40 years in the wilderness before reaching the land promised to them by God.
- Moses fasted for 40 days before receiving the ten commandments on Mount Sinai.
- Jesus spent 40 days fasting in the wilderness in preparation for his ministry.

Most Christians regard Jesus' time in the wilderness as the key event for the duration of Lent.

Why is it called Lent?

Lent is an old English word meaning 'lengthen'. Lent is observed in spring, when the days begin to get longer.

The colour purple

Purple is the symbolic colour used in some churches throughout Lent, for drapes and altar frontals.

Purple is used for two reasons: firstly because it is associated with mourning and so anticipates the pain and suffering of the crucifixion, and secondly because purple is the colour associated with royalty, and celebrates Christ's resurrection and sovereignty.

East and West

Both the eastern and western churches observe Lent but they count the 40 days differently.

The western church excludes Sundays (which is celebrated as the day of Christ's resurrection) whereas the eastern church includes them.

The churches also start Lent on different days.

Western churches start Lent on the 7th Wednesday before Easter Day (called Ash Wednesday).

Eastern churches start Lent on the Monday of the 7th week before Easter and end it on the Friday 9 days before Easter. Eastern churches call this period the 'Great Lent'.

The last week of Lent is called Holy Week.

* **online BBC.co.uk** (https://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/christianity/holydays/lent_1.shtml)