

# A HISTORY OF LENT

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As told in Matthew 4: 1-11 and Luke 4: 1-13, Jesus' ministry begins with his fasting in the desert. For forty days and forty nights, perhaps the first miracle the Son of God performs, he sits in the desert, eating no food, drinking no water. It's easily enough to kill anybody, but Jesus is well enough and strong enough to resist being tempted by Satan at the end of it!

This amazing story is what we celebrate in Lent. But as amazing as it is itself, the history of Lent is even more so. The dates, the names, the practices; all together make Lent the most interesting Christian holiday.

Like a pair of fasting and feasting bookends, we celebrate Lent just before Holy Week and Easter, placing the start of Jesus' work with the end of his life. Shrove Tuesday and Ash Wednesday are purely Lent days, and the dates are worked out according to Easter Sunday. The distance is forty-seven days; ending Lent on Palm Sunday and having Holy Week its own, or excluding Sundays from the fast and ending Lent on Easter Sunday.



Shrove Tuesday is also called Fat Tuesday, or Mardi Gras (meaning Fat Tuesday), but Shrove comes from 'shrive', meaning 'confess'. These two opposing names show the two sides of the day: to prepare for Lent, many would confess sins to cleanse their souls, and many would eat all the fatty, luxurious foods to stop them being wasted or a temptation in the following month.



Lent itself is called 'Quadragesima' in Latin, meaning 'fortieth', and many other languages have similar names. These reflect the 40 days length and the fact it is the fortieth day before Holy Week. But Lent has no similarity to fortieth or 'Quadragesima'. Instead, as Church services moved from Latin to English, they begin to use the everyday word for Spring: Lenten, meaning 'lengthen', referring to the lengthening of the days.

Most of our Lent traditions come from this time, too. Many of us cut certain food items out of our diets; sweets, cake, or red meat, for example: Then, people would cut all meat, dairy and sugar out of their diets, and the pancakes made on Shrove Tuesday were a way to use up the ingredients that would go off otherwise. These foods are rich and fatty, and were seen as a luxury, which was seen as opposed to holiness. It's amazing to think that when meat and dairy are such basics to us now.

The holiness of the period has always been reflected in the things we do during Lent. Many Churches provide Lent courses, and Mothers' Day came about from the need for people to go to their families and home Churches at least once. Many people have, and still do, fast for part of Lent, although a full fast for a full forty days (even if you don't count Sundays) would not be advisable! Most people do the much more achievable giving up of something, but this can be holy, too. When we give up cakes or sweets, we do it because we know these things are bad for us and we should cut down on them. In the case of some things, we feel, deep down that we should not be eating them at all; I gave up meat once for Lent and have been vegetarian ever since. After the horsemeat scandal, I feel very sensible!

Whether we're in a holier or healthier state of mind, we can approach Easter all the better at the end of Lent. And of course, history is always being added to; who knows what Lent will be like in the future?

