

# WHAT IS LENT?

Lent is the forty day period before Easter, excluding Sundays, beginning on Ash Wednesday and ending on the evening of Maundy Thursday, making way for the celebration of the 'Triduum', the three most important days of the Church's year – Maundy Thursday, Good Friday and Easter.

In the scriptures forty days is a traditional period of time for discipline, devotion and preparation as we see, for instance, in the Gospels when Jesus goes into the wilderness to prepare for his ministry. The early Church soon set aside the days before Easter as a time for preparing candidates for their baptism and for encouraging Christian people to pray, to give charitably and to fast. It is a fact that Christians have not always been as disciplined in such ways as people of other faiths, but many are now reclaiming the spiritual insights and benefits of using Lent properly to discover God and the self more deeply. So, what can we do this Lent?

## WORSHIP

Why not consider going to a weekly church service that you don't usually go to? At the College Chapel you might go to Morning Prayer at 8.30am or to a weekday Evensong or Compline. Or what about visiting some churches in other traditions? How long is it since you went to Ely cathedral? Cambridge has many daily services for you to join in. Lent may be a time for you to take worship a little more seriously during your working week.

## PRIVATE PRAYER

Our prayer lives can be very haphazard and undisciplined. Lent has traditionally been a time to correct this. Churches are open for you to pop in and take the deep breath of prayer. Maybe you prefer to try and

pray at home, setting aside a few minutes each day to bring yourself consciously into the presence of God. This can be a very difficult thing to do if we are wound up, distracted and stressed! We may need to light a candle, play some music or breathe slowly before we can either pray in silence or in words. For the Christian nothing is more important than our relationship with God because it affects all our other relationships, choices and behaviour. All loving relationships need time spent on them, time that can often feel as if its being wasted, and our relationship with God is no different. You might be helped by downloading the Daily Prayer app that has Morning and Evening Prayer and Compline for every day of the year.

## **GIVING UP**

Most people think that Lent is about giving something up and it can often be a good idea to see whether you are able to give a few things up. What are you addicted to (can you answer that question?!) and what does this say about you? If you give up alcohol or chocolate, say, you might also think of giving the money you would have normally spent on them to a charity. Wherever possible try and make your giving up beneficial to someone else other than you. Sometimes Lent can be a good opportunity to give up something that is harming the planet or you and the body that are, after all, God's gifts entrusted to you. If you are healthy, a "hunger lunch" once a week can be a good idea – eat less and give the money you save to a good cause.

## **TAKING ON**

Some people prefer to take things on rather than give something up. This can range from taking more care of yourself (by taking exercise, for instance) to making sure that you do something more profitable one night of the week than watching TV or staring at your phone. One

might consider helping out as a volunteer somewhere or deciding to visit someone who is lonely or not well. You could decide to be more environmentally friendly and change some bad habits. Christians need to take much more seriously their belief that God has entrusted his creation to us and that to exploit and spoil this world and its environment is sinful. Many of us need to amend our attitudes and behaviour. Or you might decide to write letters for Amnesty International or to your MP about a matter that we should take an active interest in rather than just let others take responsibility all the time. Perhaps you might consider sponsoring a child through a charitable organisation? Lent is a season in which to redeem your time rather than waste it.

## **MONEY**

As we know, a good way of taking a look at our values is to take a look at our bank statement and see where we spend our money. Most of us in the West can easily be a little more generous towards those who are less fortunate or to some charity that needs help. What about considering giving the weekly money that you would normally spend on a book, the cinema, cigarettes, beer, another shirt or skirt, say, to a charity that helps those who cannot afford such luxuries? Although many people think that all Christians can get worked up about is sex, actually the thing that Jesus talks about and warns people about much more is their attitude towards their belongings and money. What we possess can quickly possess us and we become slaves, often unaware, and pushed into a fearful or pretentious way of being. Is it time to review your giving to charity and to be more responsible in the way you share what you have?

## READING

What about treating yourself to half an hour's spiritual reading a day – and not just when you're nodding off at night? There are some excellent Lent books available. You might also use the time to learn more about our Christian tradition and history. Lent titles fresh this year include:

- Failure: What Jesus Said about Sin, Mistakes and Messing Stuff Up (Emma Ineson)
- Godforsaken: The Cross- the greatest hope of all (Stephen Cottrell)
- Meeting God in Matthew (Elaine Storkey)
- The Falling of Dusk (Paul Dominiak)
- Reflections for Lent (Kate Bruce, Mark Oakley, Graham James)
- The Way of Thomas Merton: A prayer journey through Lent (Robert Inchausti)

## ONLINE RESOURCES FOR LENT

The Church of England has an app which you might like to try:

**Dust and Glory:**

<https://www.chpublishing.co.uk/apps/dust-and-glory>

The Dean has done some podcasts for Lent, exploring faith through poetry. They will be available on this page:

<https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/audio-video/podcast>

Christian Aid has produced resources which are actually for discussion groups, which you can adapt for your own use:

<https://www.christianaid.org.uk/resources/get-involved/talking-climate-justice-small-group-discussion-guide>

Have a fruitful, prayerful and positive Lent this year.