

Great Lent: The Many Virtues of Lent

The Church is a treasury of many useful and godly customs. Though we in the Church have become accustomed to them, and think of them as just normal parts of a normal life, especially since many Christian customs have become standard aspects of American life, we tend to lose track of just how many traditions we practice.

We have holy days scattered throughout the year: Christmas, Easter, Ash Wednesday, All Saints; as well as other cultural and religious observances associated with them: Christmas Eve Lessons and Carols, Good Friday candlelight services, *Messiah* sing-alongs, Mardi Gras celebrations, Halloween trick-or-treating, even so-called 'Spring Cleaning,' the custom of doing a much-needed tidying of one's house before Easter.

Along with these Holidays (or Holy Days), we have such customs as crossing oneself, praying before meals, blessing homes when we move, marking doors during Epiphany and, if one is from a Lutheran tradition hailing from the Scandanavian or Baltic countries, massive bonfires on Transfiguration.

This does not even begin to include much of the fun we have with Christmas trees, presents, name days, garlands, Advent candles and whatever else I do not care to list at the moment.

Some of these customs are old by modern standards, stretching back to the Middle Ages. Some are much older, going back to the youth of the Church, and among the oldest of such customs is the observance of a period of fasting before Easter Sunday, a season we call in the English language, 'Lent.'

That Christians fast during the forty days before Easter is a practice we have recorded since the second century AD, and by the time of Tertullian and St. Augustine a hundred years later, it was already considered universal.

It seemed natural for Christians to fast in preparation for the great triumph of Our Lord over sin, death, and the devil on Easter Sunday. Moses spent forty days in preparation to receive the Law from God on Mt. Sinai, and Noah forty days at sea in preparation for a new world. Jonah preached to Nineveh for forty days of the judgment to come, and of course Christ fasted in the wilderness for the same while being tempted by Satan.

Though Lent as a whole, and fasting as part of it, has always been considered a preparation for rejoicing in Christ's final victory, exactly in what way we are preparing ourselves has differed from place to place and time to time, and this can be seen in how exactly the fasting itself has been practiced.

In the Greek churches, Lenten fasting was most often associated with returning to the Garden of Eden, to a simple existence of man before the Fall. We repent during Lent, and so it only made sense that we try to live as we once did before sin. Adam ate no meat, nor had any need of wine and oil to cook, but ate from every *tree bearing fruit*. So the fasts of the Greek East of the Church required consuming no flesh, wine, or oil, for the entire season.

In the Latin West, a tradition that we Lutherans are more closely associated with, Lent is associated more often with repenting from our lusts, and regaining the control over creation that God first commanded us to have before Adam disobeyed God. Because of this, Lenten fasting in the Western tradition focuses on self-denial, particularly of whatever one may be inordinately enslaved to. Oftentimes this does mean food and drink, similar to the Greek East, but often it meant fasting from everything from entertainment (so-called 'Fasting from the Eyes') to abstaining from marital relations ('Fasting from the Flesh'). Whatever one indulges in too much should be abstained from, not because it pleases God, but in obedience to the Lord's command to *subdue the earth and have dominion over it*. From this comes the practice of 'giving up something for Lent' that many Americans practice even if their own denomination does not even observe Lent!

In the Churches further east, in Western Asia and India (yes, there are Christians in India who have been there for as long as they have been in Judea!) the Lenten fast has been associated with repenting from our original *disobedience* of eating what God had commanded us not to eat. This is kept alongside God's command to St. Peter that he has made all things *clean to eat*. Because of this, these churches observe a different form of fasting: they do not eat or drink *anything*, not even

bread or water from sunrise to sunset, but then after sunset, they feast, eating whatever they want, in order to signify obedience to God in all things, whether He prohibits, or whether He allows. It is almost definitely the case that the Islamic practice of fasting in a similar manner during Ramadan is derived from this earlier Christian practice.

In Ethiopia and other parts of Africa, fasting is viewed more strictly as a form of meditation upon the sacrificial work of Jesus on the cross. It is a time for one to conform himself to the *mind of Christ* and so, in some sense, imitate Christ, so that when Holy Week arrives, one is able to understand properly God's love for us. Because of this, they fast by abstaining from meat, dairy, alcohol, oil, and affection before 3:00 PM, the hour at which Christ was crucified. This is to simulate the Lord's fasting from earthly pleasure after the Last Supper in order to 'drink of the cup which the Father has given.'

In all these traditions, Lenten fasting is always tied to charity toward the poor, with the money saved from fasting being donated after Easter day. Fasting in the Bible took many forms, and expressed many different things, but was always considered an important part of repentance and preparation. In the same way the Fast of Lent looks different from place to place and time to time, and professes to express a different aspect of repentance, but at the end, they hold one thing in common: a preparation to greet the Lord and His love for us rightly.