

WHAT'S LENT ABOUT, THEN?

St Columba, 21 February 2010

John Salmon

Deuteronomy 26: 1-2, 6-10a

Luke 4:1-13

BEFORE THE READINGS:

Introduction to the Readings

Deuteronomy is supposed to be a series of speeches made by Moses, just as the people finished their 40 years in the wilderness, though it's now accepted it's written much later, looking back and reminding the Israelite people of their history and their place as God's covenanted people, and so of their responsibilities now.

In our reading this morning, the people's comfortable life now is presented as being in the future – which gives the message more prophetic power. It calls the people to *remember* – to remember their past and their commitments.

It's a reading for the first Sunday in Lent because of its call to remember the hard times and be thankful for the good things we have.

Luke also picks up the wilderness theme, the setting for Jesus's so-called temptations – really a process of preparation and priority-setting at the start of his ministry. And Jesus is said to 'eat nothing' in that time – a source for the idea of Lenten fasting.

[Mark says it was for forty days, which represents the 40 years Moses's people wandered in the wilderness, and becomes the basis for the 40 days of Lent - from today till Easter.]

AFTER THE READINGS - THE SERMON

Introduction

The first Sunday in Lent *What's Lent all about?*

Why 'fasting'?
For how long? Why?

Today we begin this 40 day period leading up to Easter.

1. Some History

The time of Lent has its origins way back when the christian community first began to be organised as 'church'

Then, it was the time in which new Christians prepared themselves for baptism, which took place on Easter Day (all adults). It was a time of learning about what it was to be Christian and getting spiritually prepared for the big day.

It usually included some fasting ó a tradition in many religions, as a way of focusing the mind and spirit.

A couple of hundred years later Lent became 40 days, and before long the link with baptism disappeared, as babies were baptised and brought into the church. But it continued as a time of preparation for Easter.

By the Middle Ages, in northern Europe especially, the 'fasting' bit became a core focus of Lent.

This was really 'making virtue out of necessity'. In those days in that part of the world, this time of early spring was a time when the stocks of meat and eggs were very low after the winter.

The big party of pancakes on the day before Lent began ó Shrove Tuesday ó used up the remaining eggs before the time of deprivation. Mardi Gras ó õfat Tuesdayö ó and õcarnivalö are a similar celebrations.

Those who did have access to meat and other higher protein foods were encouraged to forgo them, to act in solidarity with everyone else, and all were to see this as a way of preparing for the Easter season.

Over time, the -fastingø has become more -giving something up for Lentø (I've heard people talk about giving up their diet for Lent!).

We, especially in the southern hemisphere, don't have the restriction on fat and protein, and we tend to miss the point of preparation for Easter.

One remnant in some churches being a series of -Lenten studiesø which link with the early catechetical process, where education in Christian faith took place for those about to be baptised in the great Easter celebration.

-Preparationø is our link with the origins of Lent.

2. Preparation Time

For us, then, -giving things upø is *not* what Lent is about.

It might be that as we think carefully about our lives as we prepare for the central Christian celebration of Easter we realise we need to change things ó perhaps including what we eat!

But the key is the sense of *preparation*.

In the northern hemisphere, Lenten time marks the transition from the end of winter into the start of summer.

And Lent does function then as preparation for Easter, which is the seasonal ritual of new life rising out of the dark and cold; spring from winter, symbolised in new life from the tomb.

For us this side of the world, Lent marks the transition from the end of summer into the start of winter.

So for us, Easter carries new symbols of continuing preparation for change, of the ongoing newness of life we can look for. In this country, where few trees lose their leaves, we do not have even in spring the clear single transition of winter death to summer life: it's part of our everyday living.

Lenten preparation, then, is a focus on our living each day.

Conclusion

Lent is an opportunity to review our priorities,
seek new life deep-down, in our spiritual selves,
enlarge our view of God and the world.

Let's not get hooked into irrelevant things like giving up chocolate this Lent. Instead, let's take the opportunity to prepare ourselves for Easter by thinking deeply about our own lives, about the people and issues around us, and discovering more about the meaning of Christian life.

That's what Lent was in its origins.

That picks up what Lent is about.