

WITNESS



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ASK THE ST. GEORGE'S SCHOLAR

The Rev. Prof. Greg Bloomquist,
Saint George's Scholar

Lent: Fast or Feast?

Lent – the 40 days, excluding Sundays, from Ash Wednesday to Easter – was not an “original” part of the Christian calendar. The Christians of the first centuries simply used local, secular calendars, which were oriented to agricultural and commercial life.

But the first Christians did highlight two sets of holy days within the secular year.

Weekly, they gathered on Sunday, the first day of each week, the day when God had created light (*Genesis 1.3-5*), and the day of the week on which the true light of life arose from the chaos and darkness of death (*John 20.1*). In spite of persecution and resulting martyrdom, they gathered secretly to commemorate Christ's victory over death and to thank God for this first taste of new and unending life in Christ. Sunday was a celebration of the “manifestation in time of the reality of eternal redemption in Christ”.

Annually, they celebrated the day to which every Sunday pointed, that first Sunday, the day of the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ, the day we call Easter. Easter, along with the 50 days following it leading up to Pentecost, was the one and only distinctive annual feast of the Christian year.

But what a feast! It was everything that Sunday was writ large!

And it was the day to welcome new members into the family of God through baptism.

Imagine the scene of an early Easter. It is morning, still night, just before dawn. Near a river, near a pool, wherever clean water might be available, the faithful have gathered – away from the hostile world's watching eyes – and the ones to be baptized have begun to enter into the cold, dark waters to be baptized. Suddenly someone reads the words of Paul: “Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we are buried with him by baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life” (*Romans 6.3-4*). Just before the sun bursts into glory over the horizon, shattering the darkness of the night and the cold, those in the water are

submerged under the waters in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Then, like newborns gasping for air, they arise from the waters as the sun blazes into glory on the horizon, and everyone around them shouts “Christ is risen - He is risen indeed”. It is the first day of the week, the first day of the year, and the first day in the lives of those for whom the light will never again turn to darkness. And off they would go – even if only for a short while – to the house of one of the faithful to celebrate this new life!

Eventually, after Constantine had become emperor and the church could function under the protection of the Roman Empire itself, Easter celebrations would become a great public celebration and would move indoors to the baptistery of churches. Eventually, they gained in pomp and circumstance.

But quickly they gained in numbers. For when Constantine made Christianity the religion of the Empire, new believers flooded into the church. It must have been a thrilling time for the formerly persecuted Christians.

“Through baptism, we are freed by God in Christ through the cross to leave the “old body” behind and put on the “new body” in Christ.”

But it also raised new questions: Who are all these new people? Why do they want to be baptized? What do they believe? Do they believe or are they just pretending to do so, now that the Empire is Christian?

So, it began to be necessary to have a regulated period of discernment to answer those questions, as well as a course of instruction in faith and life before baptism at Easter to ensure that those being baptized truly believed. It was this period of regulated instruction and discernment that even-

tually became (in the West) the 40 days we know as Lent.

The goal of Lent was thus to prepare new believers for the great and joyous, and yet also, solemn and even somewhat ominous events of Easter. For remember: Easter, the start of new life in Christ, began with

the death of the old life. Those to be baptized were preparing during Lent to be drowned - - which is what “baptism” implied to those who heard the word. They were being taught, disciplined, and encouraged by those who had already died in Christ and

been raised to new life and who were now citizens of another empire (*Philippians 3.20*). But they themselves had not yet passed through death, had not yet abandoned all claims in and to this world. So there was an awesome anticipation about what was coming, a mix of foreboding and intense longing.

From this perspective, it is not difficult to see how Lent was not just a preparation for a celebration and party – which is what would follow for 50 days after Easter – but also a period of weighty reflection and meditation on what was going to be involved in getting to that celebration, namely, death to this world.

And so, it is also not surprising to find that various activities became regularly associated with this 40-day period of preparation, activities intended to help get ready for this event. Along

with discernment of faith and an initial instruction in what to believe and how to live this new life in Christ, came admonitions to fasting, sexual abstinence, prayer, disciplined study, and other disciplines of body, mind, and spirit.

The goal was very similar to the preparation that any athlete would have been prepared to undertake in order to give himself completely – even to the possibility of death! – to the race or the competition that lay before him. From the beginning, this is



how the way of the cross had always been presented. Building on Jesus' teaching that taking up one's cross involved a daily loss of anything that we treasure more than the crown of victory itself (*Mark 8.34-35*), Paul had described the way of the cross as the track or arena in which Olympic athletes gave their all, surrounded in the stands by cheering supporters (*cf. 1 Corinthians 9.24-27 and Philipians 3.13-14*).

Over the centuries, some began to think that it was our own exertion in giving up of everything that gained us the victory. As a result, Lent, too, became an occasion for self-sacrifice (denying oneself chocolate and wine, or through some even greater and perhaps more morbid mortification) and outstanding Christian life (sacrificial service, almsgiving, etc.) as a way of forcing God to accept us.

But the point of Lent was to ask "are you ready to join the race?" not "can you run the race?" The answer to that latter question was clearly, and always, "no, not in my own strength, but only if the One who conquered death enables me". The cry of Easter has never been the human "yes, you can" but always the divine "yes, He has"! Lent was an occasion to know just how true that was.

And it was an opportunity to remember that we should not want this old, frail body, nor the frail world it inhabits, to be the reality of our new life in Christ. Through baptism,

we are freed by God in Christ through the cross to leave the "old body" behind and put on the "new body" in Christ. Then, and only then, will we be able to run the race in Christ "full out". This is why Paul says: "don't look back". After all, what do you

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have to look back to after baptism, except to an "old body" and an "age that is passing away"? Why would you want to look back?

So, while there are many still who use Lent as an expression of their effort to "put things right with God" through penance and self-mortification, a Biblical approach to Lent would be to see it as an ideal time to invite to faith those who have never known faith by asking them "are you ready for the race of your life?" Lent can then become a crucial time for them to get their lives in order -- body, mind, heart, and soul -- to be able to say good-bye to all claims on what this world has to offer.

Lent can also be a perfect time for those of us who are already in the race by the grace of God in Christ to show those about to join the race how it is done. We do so by showing how we have been graciously freed from everything that would hold us back from a joyous and wonder-filled

sprint toward a new creation.

For both of us, Lent will be a time when our pulse will start to race just a bit faster, our palms sweat a bit more, the adrenalin in our bodies -- old ones and new! -- start to make our skin tingle as we all get ready to run together with a burst of energy on Easter morning. Then, either as those to be baptized into Christ or those who have been showing them how the race is run, we will both get a "second wind"

from Easter to Pentecost as we hear a great shout of joy echoing throughout the land: 'up from the grave He arose, with a mighty triumph o'er his foes, a Victor from the dark domain, forever with His saints to reign'.

Runners ... saints ... saints-to-be ... to your marks ... ready ...

1. Gregory Dix, *The Shape of the Liturgy* (additional notes by Paul V. Marshall; reprint, 1945; New York: Seabury Press, 1983), 320.

2. Unlike the English term "Lent", which is borrowed from the Old English verb for "lengthen" and refers to the lengthening of days in Spring in the northern hemisphere, the term for the period in some other Western languages actually refers to the 40 days, for example, "carême" (French) or "cuaresma" Spanish, both of which derive from the Latin "quadragesima" (i.e., "fortieth").

3. For further insight into this reality of baptism, please see my sermon on May 18, 2008, available on the St. George's WWW site.