



Lent

A Parish Guide to Celebrating the Season of Lent
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Lent is a preparation for the celebration of Easter. For the Lenten liturgy disposes both catechumens and the faithful to celebrate the paschal mystery: catechumens, through the several stages of Christian initiation; the faithful, through reminders of their own baptism and through penitential practices.

General Norms for the Liturgical Year and the Calendar # 27

As a period of purification, Lent is not merely a period of bodily fasting. It is a period of general readjustment, of thorough renovation from the outer spheres of life down to the roots of its innermost fibres. We have only to glance at the chain of prayers which runs through the lenten liturgy from Ash Wednesday to Easter to see the meaning of Lent. It is a chastisement of the body in order that the soul may grow. It is purification and liberation. It is a cure, and the fasts are meant to be medicinal. It is a sacred observance, nay, it is direct sanctification. It is the only route to freedom and fulfilment, for it loosens the grip of evil and leads us, worn and weary, to full and wholesome restoration.

Theodore Wesseling

Lent begins with Ash Wednesday with its stark dramatic ritual of signing the forehead with ashes. There is something about this ritual that speaks to us deeply: the acknowledgment of our human fragility and mortality and our need for reconciliation and conversion. Ash Wednesday marks the beginning of a journey: a metaphorical journey through the wastelands and ash heaps of our lives; a journey through deserts where our hunger and thirst for God is awakened anew; a journey through the wilderness of lurking dangers and luring temptations. All of this needs to be traversed if we are to reach the Promised Land – where unimaginable dreams are realised. The hard and necessary task of our Lenten journey is rewarded by the joy of Easter.

Throughout these 40 days we are schooled in Christian virtue through the disciplines of prayer, fasting and almsgiving. In this, both the personal and social dimensions of Christian living are brought to the fore: “During Lent penance should be not only inward and individual, but also outward and social” (*Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, # 110). To this end Project Compassion – a work of the Catholic aid organisation, Caritas International – offers an effective way of showing our solidarity with those burdened by poverty and injustice.

Finally, Lent is a time to prepare for baptism: “In the liturgy and liturgical catechesis of Lent the reminder of baptism already received or the preparation for its reception, as well as the theme of repentance, renew the entire community along with those being prepared to celebrate the paschal mystery, in which each of the elect will share through the sacraments of initiation” (*Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults [RCIA]*, #125).

Mood

The mood of Lent is sombre as befits the penitential nature of this season. Music and the environment play an important part in helping to create the setting and mood. The environment needs to be stark and simple; the music sober and free from unnecessary embellishment. During Lent all our senses are engaged in fasting, this includes fasting from sight and sound as much as from taste.

Readings

Ash Wednesday

The readings for Ash Wednesday are the same each year. Together they set the tone for the Lenten season. The first reading from the prophet Joel functions as a summons: “Sound the trumpet in Zion! Order a fast, proclaim a solemn assembly.” The second reading from 2 Corinthians is likewise a call, a call to embrace a relationship in Christ: “This is our acceptable time”. The gospel reading is from Matthew’s account of the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus lays down the true meaning of prayer, fasting and almsgiving that will guide us throughout the 40 days.

Year A

The first readings for Year A present the vast scope of salvation history. This begins with the Genesis account of God’s original blessing and humankind’s fall from grace. The blessing of Abraham and Sarah is recalled in the second Sunday of Lent. The third Sunday recalls the Israelites in their journey through the wilderness. We then travel further along the path of history to the anointing of David as accounted in 1 Samuel. For the remaining Sundays we have readings from the prophets Ezekiel and Isaiah.

In the second readings we are treated with the rich tapestry woven from the writings of St Paul: Romans, 2 Timothy, Ephesians and Philippians. They offer us theological insight into the compassionate nature of our God who continually reaches out to us in Christ.

During Year A we begin with the gospel of Matthew for the first two Sundays of Lent but then switch to John’s gospel for the remaining Sundays: the woman at the well (3rd Sunday), the healing of the man born blind (4th Sunday), and the raising of Lazarus (5th Sunday). These readings are chosen for their strong baptismal motifs, well suited for the final preparations of the RCIA.

Year B

The first readings for Year B focus on the covenant love that God establishes with his people. This covenant is symbolized by the rainbow in the Book of Genesis that we hear proclaimed on the First Sunday of Lent. On the Second Sunday of Lent we listen again from the Book of Genesis in which the covenant is maintained through the intervention of God in the sacrifice of Isaac. The theme of covenant is continued in the accounts from Exodus and 2 Chronicles

over the following Sundays. On the Fifth Sunday of Lent the new covenant is prophesied in Jeremiah.

The epistle readings offer a variety of NT authors: 1 Peter, Romans, 1 Corinthians, Ephesians and Hebrew. Together they present a Christological focus for the season of Lent.

During Year B we begin with the gospel of Mark for the first two Sundays of Lent but then switch to John's gospel for the remaining Sundays.

Year C

An array of Old Testament readings is set before us during Year C: Deuteronomy, Genesis, Exodus, Joshua and Isaiah. "The first readings for the seasons of Lent provide us with a family photo album of important moments in the religious history of ancient Israel." Dianne Bergant, *Preaching the New Lectionary*.

The epistle readings are from the Pauline corpus: Romans, Philippians, and 1 & 2 Corinthians. As in Year B, the second readings maintain a Christological emphasis outlining the salvific role played by Christ and our challenge to live a new life in him.

Apart from the Fifth Sunday of Lent – when we listen to the account of the woman caught in adultery in John's gospel – the gospel readings are all taken from Luke: the temptation of Jesus in the desert, the transfiguration, the parable of the fig tree and the prodigal son.

Passion (Palm) Sunday

This is the only Sunday in which two gospels readings are proclaimed. The first takes place outside the church as part of the Commemoration of the Lord's Entrance into Jerusalem. The second takes place within the Liturgy of the Word and is taken from the passion account according to Matthew, Mark and Luke for the respective cycle of readings for Years A, B and C.

The first reading is what is known as the "third servant song" in the book of Isaiah (the first and second servant songs will be read during Holy Week and the fourth servant song on Good Friday). The second reading is the Christological hymn "His state was divine" found in the letter to the Philippians. While the gospel readings are taken from Years A, B & C the first and second readings are the same for each year.

As in every season of the liturgical year readers need to be reminded and encouraged to prepare well for the proclamation of the scriptures, particularly by consulting *Break Open the Word*.

Music

Lent includes aural fasting. We abstain from singing the Gloria and the jubilant Alleluia – the Alleluia is replaced by one of the alternative forms of the Lenten Gospel Acclamation. We are also encouraged to use instrumental accompaniment sparingly: “the use of musical instruments is allowed only to support the singing” *Ceremonial of Bishops*, 252. We might also consider omitting the song of praise after Communion or the recessional song.

It is worth considering the option of using a seasonal (common) psalm. That is, we sing the same psalm throughout the season. The common psalms for Lent are: Psalms 51 (*Miserere*), 91 and 130 (*De Profundis*).

Music for Palm Sunday needs to be carefully calibrated. The commemoration of Jesus’ triumphant entry into Jerusalem – which begins the liturgy – is soon dramatically contrasted with the Servant Song of Isaiah, the Psalm response “My, God, my God, why have you abandoned me?” and the Passion reading. The music needs to accompany both the pageantry and pathos that is characteristic of this liturgy.

Environment

Violet is the colour of the season with the optional use of rose for the fifth Sunday of Lent – ‘Laetare Sunday’. However, the colour abruptly changes to red for Passion (Palm) Sunday, then resumes to violet for the remaining days of Holy Week.

Some parishes have separate vestments for Lent and Advent to distinguish these seasons: for Lent the violet is toned by the red spectrum as opposed to tones of the blue spectrum during Advent.

Flowers are not forbidden *per se*: “During Lent the altar is not to be decorated with flowers” *Ceremonial of Bishops*, 252. However, in keeping with the spirit of Lent it would seem best to abstain completely from flowers during Lent. Many parishes substitute floral arrangements with driftwood, or other such decorations that evoke the privations of the desert or wilderness.

In the past statues were covered with purple cloth. “The practice of covering the crosses and images in the church may be observed if the episcopal conference should so decide. The crosses are to be covered until the end of the celebration of the Lord’s Passion on Good Friday. Images are to remain covered until the beginning of the Easter Vigil” *On Preparing and Celebrating the Paschal Feasts*, 26.

Sanctoral cycle

The Annunciation of the Lord is celebrated on March 25. This usually falls within Lent but if Lent begins early then it may fall within the season of Easter. Two important saints also have their feast days during Lent: St Patrick on March 17 and St Joseph on March 19. In Australia both of these feast days are given the rank of solemnity.

Other Celebrations

RCIA

This is a time of intense preparation for the RCIA candidates. The Rite of Election takes place at the beginning of Lent. Although this rite usually takes place at the Cathedral, it is important that the whole parish pray and support the newly elect. The Scrutinies are celebrated on the third, fourth and fifth Sundays of Lent.

Baptism

Easter is the season for baptism. The whole shape of the Lenten season is orientated to the paschal mystery celebrated in all its fullness at Easter. The celebration of baptism at Easter clearly illumines the paschal significance of this sacrament: our dying and rising to new life in Christ. It is therefore incongruent to celebrate baptism prematurely during Lent. There are always exceptions, of course, but these should be made for good pastoral reasons; otherwise, baptisms should be suspended during Lent.

Reconciliation

During this penitential season the faithful are encouraged to avail themselves of the sacraments of penance, either in the form of the first or second rite of reconciliation. There are also two penitential services for Lent in the Rite of Penance (Appendix II). These communal non-sacramental celebrations could be used in the absence of a priest, or where there is a shortage of ordained priests making the second rite unfeasible.

Way of the Cross

The *Via Crucis* (Stations of the Cross) is a popular and fitting devotion for Lent. The Stations of the Cross are usually made up of hymns, procession, silence and reflective readings.

The traditional form of the *Via Crucis* remains the norm, however, alternative forms, such as the Biblical Way of the Cross, are often used.

Weddings

If weddings occur during Lent then couples need to be aware and respect the Lenten environment, and therefore flower arrangements will need to be in harmony with the ambience of the church during this season.