

Lent

IN AN ASH Wednesday MEDITATION, Arnold Edinborcugh observed, "If we are to fight our twentieth-century battle as nobly, as passionately and as unremittingly as the first-century Christian martyrs did, or as the sixteenth-century Reformers did, or as the last century's devoted missionaries did, we shall have to be as secure in our faith as they were." Such strong and devout convictions are hard to come by in our age dominated by secularism.

Lent is a season for preparation for Easter. It begins on Ash Wednesday and includes the forty days before Easter. The day gets its name from the custom observed in some churches of dabbing ashes on the head as a sign of penitence. This custom dates back to the tenth century. One explanatory formula read (from Gen.3:19), "Remember, O man, that you are dust, and unto dust shall you return." Not Christ's crucifixion but man's predicament is the theme. The first four and one-half weeks of Lent deal with man's predicament alone and not with the suffering and the cross of Christ. This period speaks to man's need of the Saviour, to the perplexities and brevity of life. The cross is meant for a dying world, which cannot save itself. During the last two weeks the perspective of the cross-as a means of reconciliation to God and re-creation-is shown. The fourth Lenten Sunday breaks in as day of rejoicing for forgiveness of sin. Lent is a Journey from the city of sin to the cross and the empty tomb.

Sermons and private devotions relate to self-examination, discipline and renewal. The mood is introspective. As Christians we meditate on Christ's suffering and death. In our Scripture reading we usually concentrate on the four Gospels and the epistles. Fasting and prayer are also a part of the lenten season. In our Reformed circles we seemed to have forgotten the act of fasting, but a brief look at recent church history shows that Martin Luther, John Calvin, John Knox, John Wesley, Abraham Kuyper, and many other Reformation Christians practised fasting in their desire to draw closer to God. The Bible also reveals a long list of believers who earnestly sought the Lord and fasted. The apostle Paul, Isaiah, Daniel, and Zechariah are among the notable Bible characters who fasted. As Reformed Christians we don't emphasize fasting in connection with prayer. Historically the Lenten season was observed on the church calendar. Sermons would concentrate on some aspect of Christ's redemptive work. Are we losing the spirit of Lent? The prayerful, meditative rereading of Christ's life story will greatly encourage us in our faith. That is why Lent is still important. This season of the year gives a renewed opportunity to strengthen our bonds with the Saviour.

Lent is not what it used to be in the life of the church. Some claim that it is another casualty of our fast moving secular times. Who can stick to six and one-half week time period dedicated to meditation on something, which happened nearly two thousand years ago? The suffering and death of Christ doesn't seem to say much to a world in which cruelty, violence, abuse, murder, fear and hunger abound. An increasingly large number of critics wonder what practical difference Lent makes since Christians concentrate on their own personal piety. How can they spend time on meditation and fasting while the world around them is falling apart? I suggest that instead of shelving Lent we should recapture its traditional meaning. It offers much needed spiritual discipline.

Though the lenten season concentrates on Christ's suffering and death, the stamp of His resurrection is on it. Easter is not just a mini celebration after the dark days of Lent. It is not an afterthought. Christ's death on the cross would have been in vain if He had not risen. The perspective of Lent is the empty tomb. Christ broke the bonds of death! Alleluia! We may never forget this note of triumph. Lent is kept for Easter.

In the fourth century, when the Christian church became the only recognized faith of the Roman Empire, the consequent institutionalization of the church led to a strong emphasis on form, ritual and liturgy. Lent became an observance of forty days, which by the tenth century was obligatory upon the entire Western church. Fasting became its prominent feature. The church recognized that since the six weeks of Lent allowed only for thirty-six days of fasting (Sunday always being a festival of the resurrection) four extra days of fasting were needed and thus the season began on the Wednesday preceding the first Sunday in Lent. By tradition preparations for the fasting season were made by using up scraps of fat, etc., on the previous day. This day became known as Shrove Tuesday. Thus it gave rise to the custom of eating pancakes that day. Some churches still keep this tradition.

The practice of fasting has its roots in Scripture. The Old Testament refers to many special public and private fasts, which had to be accompanied by genuine repentance and righteous deeds. Our Lord fasted during His forty-day wilderness experience. He frequently spoke of fasting with approval. In the Sermon on the Mount He placed fasting, alms-giving and prayer on the same level. He also recommended it as an effective weapon in spiritual warfare against Satan when He said, " This kind does not go out except by prayer and fasting" (Matt. 17). Fasting is a Biblical practice of sound spiritual value. In course of time it degenerated into a mere ritual. The sixteen century Protestant reformers rejected obligatory fast days with much of the other prescribed rituals of the Church of Rome: though Luther and Calvin and other Reformers proclaimed general fasting in time of trouble in the nation or in the church. Christian statesman-theologian Abraham Kuyper (1837 1920) noted,

"Today fasting is a rarity. Few ever think of it. Few remember seeing mother or father fast. Even in times of distress we fail to take recourse to fasting and prayer, as did our forefathers. Is ours a period of greater spirituality? Can we afford to dispense with a means of godliness of which our fathers felt a need?"

We can't dispense with this Biblical tradition. As a spiritual discipline fasting and prayer draws us near to God. In our modern times there is also a growing custom to link fasting to the call to love one's neighbour, giving the cost of a normal meal to relieve world hunger. Lent should be retained. When we neglect the season we will become the poorer for it.

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