

# LENT:

## Beginning on Ash Wednesday



6 March 2019 is Ash Wednesday, the first day of Lent in the Christian calendar. From Ash Wednesday to the day before Easter, excluding the Sundays, it is a period of 40 days. The number 40 carries some biblical significance:

- Moses fasted for 40 days when he was with God on Mt Sinai. (Ex 34:28)
- Elijah fasted for 40 days when he fled to the mountain. (1 Ki 19:8)
- According to the Gospels, Jesus fasted for 40 days in the Judean Desert, and rejected Satan's temptations 3 times after His baptism and before he commenced His public preaching.
- God gave a 40-day warning to Nineveh that their city would be overthrown. (Jonah 3:4)

*"The Ninevites believed God. A fast was proclaimed, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth." – Jonah 3:5*

Traditional churches have observed the Lent season as a 40-day period for meditation on the suffering of Jesus and on our transgressions – with fasting (excepting Sundays), self-denial, repentance of sins and doing good. It is strictly speaking not a season of celebration, but a season for a solemn assembly with a humble spirit to seek God for His mercy and grace. Our

mindfulness of our abject state being in sin brings out by sheer contrast the holiness and glory of God. May our broken and contrite hearts then have the disposition to receive His Word being preached and explained, with our endeavour to be doers of the Word. (James 1:22)

### Use of Ashes



The use of ashes on Ash Wednesday is an adaptation of its use in biblical time:

- Ashes symbolize mourning. *“When Mordecai learned of all that had been done, he tore his clothes, put on sackcloth and ashes, and went out into the city, wailing loudly and bitterly.” – Esther 4:1*
- Ashes symbolize repentance. *“So I turned to the Lord God and pleaded with him in prayer and petition, in fasting, and in sackcloth and ashes.” – Daniel 9:3 (Also, Job 42:6; Neh 9:1)*
- Jesus Himself made reference to ashes. *“Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago, sitting in sackcloth and ashes.” – Lk 10:13*

Apart from mourning and repentance, the symbolic sprinkling of ashes also represents the fragility and brevity of human life. (Job 30:19)

Gen 3:19 tells us, *“By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return.”*

## Use of Oil



Our mourning and repentance is a statement of our desire to turn from sin, and turn our life, to Jesus Christ. Only through Jesus Christ can we have hope of being cleansed from sin to live an eternal life in heaven.

Ashes aside, Christians are anointed with oil as a sign of God's favour. Hebrews 1:9 says, *"You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness; therefore God, your God, has set you above your companions by anointing you with the oil of joy."*

## Testing Time

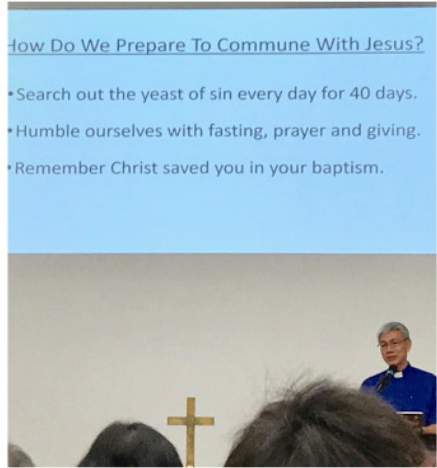


The solemn season of Lent connects our thoughts with the testing of Jesus in the desert. Though tempted, Jesus was not taken in by Satan's wiles. As we go through 40 days of Lent, some of us may be experiencing a spiritual desert condition with a dryness in our soul. Here is an advice:

*"Droughts and difficulties are a reality for all of us. When the dry of your drought is fierce, God is inviting you to serve and trust Him in the arid, arduous trenches of it. You. Are. Not. Alone."* – Gwen Smith

*"Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak."* (Mt 26:41)

At the end of 40 days, Jesus came out of the desert and began His early Galilean Ministry, proclaiming the good news of God. (Mk 1:14 – 3:6)



**Decision time (to repent and believe),**

**Preparation time (to commune with Jesus)**

**& Reminder (repentance in entire life)**



At the end of the period of 40 days is the time of decision for those who are still undecided:

*“The time has come,” Jesus said. “The kingdom of God has come near. **Repent and believe the good news!**” – Mk 1:15*

The decision to repent and believe in the good news would lead up to the Holy Thursday (Maundy Thursday) when Jesus would have the Passover Meal with His disciples and establish the Holy Communion.

There is preparation time for the disciples to commune with Jesus in eating the Passover. (Lk 22:7)

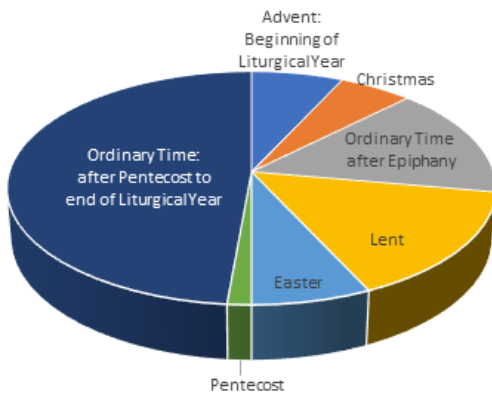
We recognize our observance of Lent as:

- time to repent and believe in the good news,
- preparation time for communion with the risen Christ in and through His revealed Word, and
- a reminder of our ongoing need to repent for every sin that enters our life from time to time, and a reminder that mercy and grace is found in Jesus.

Repentance is not a one-off “ritual”. It is in the daily posture of a Christian in humble submission to God. The first thesis of Martin Luther reads:

*“When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said ‘Repent,’ he intended that the entire life of believers should be repentance.”*

### **Contemplating our spiritual formation through seasons**



Lent is not the only season in the Christian calendar. Each season in the Christian year gives us an opportunity to contemplate our spiritual formation as we reflect on the significance of the relevant events.

Ever since the Fall (Genesis 3), the travails man faced due to sin led him to long for the promised Messiah. The promise was fulfilled by the Nativity of Jesus. Thereafter, from the Lord's

public ministry, the call to repent and believe in the good news was proclaimed loud and clear as imperative events coursed through the Holy Week (covering Palm Sunday, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday and Easter eve). Finally, man rejoiced with eternal hope upon the resurrection of our Lord on Easter Day.

Our commemorations of the seasons in the church calendar also make us perceptive of our shifting experience as we inevitably transit across mountains and valleys.

From the Passion of Christ to His glorious resurrection; from the sad spells in our life to the delightful moments – as I ponder the seasons in the church calendar, I am also contemplative of the seasons in one’s life that will have a culmination point. For those who repent and believe in the good news, the climax will be the glorious fulfilment of their destiny.

- *“God is not man, one given to lies, and not a son of man changing his mind. Does he speak and not do what he says? Does he promise and not come through?” (Num 23:19 MSG)*
- *“Put it in writing, because it is not yet time for it to come true. But the time is coming quickly, and what I show you will come true. It may seem slow in coming, but wait for it; it will certainly take place, and it will not be delayed.” (Hab 2:3 GNB)*

### **Trusting God for your plans**



“Commit to the Lord whatever you do, and he will establish your plans.” – Prov 16:3

*John Lee*