

Lent Possibilities for the Church



1. There could be something here for you to use during Lent.

Lent is sometimes presented as a spiritual pilgrimage, from Ash Wednesday to Good Friday. Lent follows the journey of Jesus from the wilderness to the cross, and asks us to be mindful of that journey. For Lent, the journey, and not its culmination, is the focus. It is a pilgrimage to be taken by each individual Christian, and also by churches, as communities of Christians living out their faith together.

There are many symbols and symbolic actions which have developed in different parts of the church during the centuries between Jesus' journey to his death and resurrection and today. Symbols, like prayers, sermons and many things, can become empty of real value, but they can also capture real insights and provoke us to reflection in a way that spoken or written words do not.

There may be something here, or in the other resources for the specific days of Lent, that you could adopt and/or adapt to bring into your worship or into your outreach into your community.



2. Lent is traditionally seen as a time for stripping things down to the basics, in order to achieve a clearer vision of God's values, perspectives and principles.

Our Visual Environment

a) In many church traditions there is a conviction that what we see during times of corporate worship, if the visual environment is prepared sensitively and appropriately, can help us to deepen our sense of reflection, rather than distract us. The simplifying of our visual environment helps us to settle into a contemplative mood, and encourages us to focus inwardly on God within us.

Christians in a number of traditions, especially in the more liturgical churches, instinctively sense that lavish displays, or ornamentation to the worship environment, are inappropriate in this more solemn season of Lent. The contrast of the understated nature of Lent with the lavish nature of Christmas decorations, gift-giving, and seasonal parties is marked.

This is why banners, paintings and even ornate crosses were physically veiled in churches in earlier times, and still are in some traditions. Doing so reflected and expressed a desire to

simplify the visual environment, to help worshipers to concentrate and focus on the Lord himself at the heart of the worship service. This was especially done during the last two weeks in Lent.

The traditional 'restriction' of decoration, fresh flowers, brightly coloured banners, or other church adornments, heightens our senses and anticipation, preparing us for the resurrection of life, joy and colour that comes with Jesus' resurrection. The veils were / are only lifted during the Easter Sunday service. This symbolic act can bring a real sense of drama, of joy, of the celebration of light and beauty, to the Easter service.

Could a form of this kind of visual symbolism, removing or veiling the decorative features of your sanctuary, if explained, be effective in your church?



b) It used to be a practice in the UK, and in many countries, that after the death of a relative, during the *initial* period of mourning, any photographs or portraits of them, or even family photographs or portraits that included them, were removed or turned to face the wall. This was seen as an expression of grief at the loss of the loved one. The painful struggle of realising that you now had to live without their physical presence was symbolised by the loss of sight of their pictorial images.

Of course the photographs and portraits were no less present in the rooms for their having been turned around, and photographs or paintings that were removed would be noticeable by their absence. Arguably, the family, and also visiting friends, would have been even more aware of them than ever. The desire to turn the photographs and paintings back to the front would have grown daily, until the day when the family were able to start moving on with their lives, to start facing up to the loss, and to start again, actively, to remember the living person, as he/she was in life, not in death.

When church decorations were veiled in this way during Lent, it was for some as if the churches had been prepared for mourning. The veiled objects were no less present for their coverings, and the congregations would have been more aware of them than ever. They were / are waiting for Easter Sunday and the revelation that there is no longer any loss for us. Jesus is alive and with us for ever.

Could this particular imaginative setting, if explained, be effective and helpful for some in your church?



c) Churches from some non-liturgical, Reformed traditions have also sensed it to be appropriate to have a more subdued spirituality during Lent. Practices have included not having floral arrangements in church and limiting the exuberant festivity at weddings.

Could this kind of minimalist 'restriction' of colour and vibrancy, if explained, be effective in your church?



Our Musical Environment

a) In many church traditions, including Reformed churches, music was / is often restrained during Lent. Exuberant hymns and songs are avoided, although quiet hymns and songs that express joy and trust in the Lord are encouraged.

More broadly, in the liturgy itself, in the Orthodox and Catholic families of the church, the liturgies were / are changed, removing all the parts which involve the singing or chanting of 'Alleluias'. Alleluias are restored to the worshiping, singing congregations on Easter Sunday.

Could this kind of understating of overt and exuberant joy, if explained, be effective in your church?



b) Some traditions only have unaccompanied singing during Lent. Instrumental music is avoided altogether, and only the human voice is used to sing to the Lord. A cantor is often used to lead the singing of the congregation.

Could this 'restriction' to the human voice alone, if explained, be effective in your church?



c) I want to suggest a metaphor to help us to appreciate how these musical ‘restrictions’ could be understood positively. The traditional ‘restriction’ of instrumental music and openly joyful singing serves to heighten our senses and anticipation, preparing us for the resurrection of life, joy and musical extravagance that comes with Jesus’ resurrection.

We can think of it along the lines of athletes waiting at the starting line for the race starter to fire the gun to signal the start of the race. Better still, we think of school or other organisation sports days, where the starter has no gun, but calls out: ‘On your marks, get set, go!’ Each runner is waiting tensely, expectantly, but unable to move until the command is given – Go! This is not a command in the sense that the runners are being told to do something that they don’t want to do. They want this command; they are waiting for it; they are anticipating it with real pleasure. The command is really the permission to explode into doing what they desperately want to do.

The underlying theological and pastoral conviction of the value of Lent is that spending time in waiting with the Lord, walking reflectively with him through the days of Lent, will not only form us spiritually as disciples of the suffering Messiah, but will produce a wonderful explosion of joy on Easter Sunday such as we could not experience if we treated all the days leading up to it as if they were really like any other days.

Perhaps, at the start of Lent, and maybe at your first worship service in Lent, you could organise a church obstacle race. This needn't be a traditional race around a track with hurdles and nets, etc, though it could be that, if there is suitable property. It could be an imaginative way of having tricky indoor 'obstacles' to be overcome in a circuit round a room or two.

This could be a way to involve children and family groups within the church.

The race could be very tricky for most of its course, but then there would be a decent distance at the end for straight running / walking. This could then be explained in terms of running our race as Christians, looking to the end of the race, when we are at ease with Jesus. This could then be related to Lent, and the walking with Jesus through his tribulations, before running with him and to him on Easter Sunday.

Could this be an effective participation event, if explained, in your church?



3. Lent can also be seen in terms of plant growth. It is a time of quiet, hidden growth and preparation for bursting forth with colour and vibrancy.

For northern hemisphere Christians, Lent begins in the time between winter and spring, when the daylight hours are low, and only gradually lengthening. The English word, Lent, is actually derived from an Old English word *lencten*, related to the word, 'length', and associated with the start of this lengthening of days as we get closer to summer.

For those of us in northern countries, Lent begins in a season of nature which has a restrained colour palate, lacking the bright colours that characterise other seasons. There are many shades of grey and white, and some darker, subdued colours; there are bare branches on the trees; plants and trees have been pared back; there is dull, lifeless mud everywhere.

But underground, it is a season of quiet, hidden growth. Flower bulbs, planted in the autumn, are gathering strength in the cold darkness so that they might bloom beautifully and joyfully when the sun and the warmth return. Nature all around us is preparing to burst out with evident and exuberant life. Colours and textures are in readiness, and will soon be on their way.

When I was a child, it was also common for children to plant tulip, daffodil and hyacinth bulbs in pots and place them under our beds through the winter months, bringing them out when they started to blossom in the spring. (Do many people still do this?) Schools used to do the same with the children, keeping the potted bulbs in dark cupboards until the spring, and taking them out occasionally to see the rate of growth.

Churches could do something similar during Lent. Because different spring bulbs take different times to grow and flourish, someone with appropriate knowledge will need to advise churches about the lead time needed for this idea. Have the children in the church, or indeed everyone, pot spring bulbs at the right time for blossoming at Easter. Then, get them to bring the potted bulbs to an Ash Wednesday service, or whatever the first service in Lent is in your church. Place them in a cupboard, or under a table draped with cloths, which has been brought into the church for this purpose.

Reference can be made to these bulbs at succeeding services during Lent. Perhaps no mention could be made on Good Friday, as if they were forgotten in the awfulness of death. Then, on Easter Sunday morning, the potted flowers can be brought out, in all their beauty and life, and set out for all to see. After what seemed like the death of winter, comes the life of nature. This can be compared, in analogy, to what seemed like the forever death of Jesus, followed by his resurrected life. This analogy can also be applied to us, dying and rising with Jesus.

Could this perspective, if explained, be effective in your church?

40

4. The length of the Lent season is one of its most symbolically important aspects.

The traditional 40 days of Lent (slightly different numbers of days are found in different church traditions) are associated, biblically, with discipline, preparation and self-denial. For example:

- During the flood, it rained for 40 days and 40 nights (Genesis 7:12). After the waters had been receding for some time, ‘at the end of 40 days’ Noah sent a raven out to test the waters (Genesis 8:6-7).
- Moses was on the mountain with God for 40 days (Exodus 24:18; 34:28).
- Elijah travelled for 40 days before reaching the cave where he had his vision (1 Kings 19:8).
- Nineveh was given 40 days to repent (Jonah 3:4).
- Most directly related to Lent, of course, Jesus spent 40 days in the wilderness, fasting and praying before beginning his public ministry (Matthew 4:2).

This series of associations with 40 day periods, as well as other examples of it, could provide a helpful basis for sermons / reflections during Lent.



5. Many people especially associate Lent with fasting.

a) Even in the general population, the question is commonly asked: what are you giving up for Lent? This ‘giving up’ is popularly associated with food and drink, but Lent is not restricted to this. It would be an impoverished spiritual discipline if it referred only to food and drink, although it can, and does, include these.

The point is that the focus should not be on fasting, but on self-denial more generally – and more deeply. Living as a Christian means denying ourselves, taking up our cross and following Jesus (Matthew 16:24-26).

It is worth noting that in the Jewish tradition, at seasons of solemn remembrance and repentance, people abstain from wearing their best clothes and shoes, or any particularly bright and colourful clothes, or any jewellery. Some Christian traditions have reflected this same commitment to self-denial.

Lent is a season of reflection and preparation of the soul, recognising again how sinful we continue to be, even after we become Christians, and realising again what this cost Jesus. By observing the 40 days of Lent, Christians focus on Jesus’ sacrifice, including his

withdrawal into the wilderness for 40 days. This is why the tradition arose of marking the period by fasting. But the ancient churches knew that Jesus was not only deprived of food and water. He was deprived of all the pleasures of everyday life.

Therefore, many Christians draw this into their own spiritual discipline at this time. They choose not to go to the cinema, music concerts or other forms of entertainment. Without ignoring the importance of the birthdays, weddings, anniversaries, etc of family and close friends, they will avoid parties and going out for meals or drinks. Through fasting and other expressions of self-denial, depriving ourselves of something which we like helps us to acknowledge that we are dependent on God alone for our lives.

Could your church be invited to consider marking this call to a life of self-denial with a commitment to practical self-denial relating to something that they enjoy as a simple pleasure? The focus would be on why we would be reflecting on self-denial in the context of Jesus' giving of himself, our dependence on him, and our need to realise again the radical call to discipleship which he gives to us.



b) But spiritual disciplines should be positive, involving us in doing positive things. The spiritual disciplines of Lent are a positive gift to us, relating to challenging us, and to reflection in action. Many Christians therefore choose to become actively involved in forms of spiritual life with which they are not normally engaged.

Perhaps you could encourage members of your church to engage in group or individual Bible studies during Lent? This may develop into an ongoing love of Bible study. There are many study resources produced by different Christian organisations, some especially for Lent.

Perhaps you could encourage members of your church to volunteer with a local charity or community service during Lent? Again, this may develop into an ongoing commitment.

6. Symbols of Lent

There are various other symbols associated with the season of Lent. Perhaps you can think of a way to adopt and adapt some of these, explaining their significance to your members?



The Colour Violet

In the ancient liturgical churches, up until today, violet is the liturgical colour for the whole season of Lent. Cloths for communion tables will be violet; sometimes violet drapes are hung

from parts of the walls; it is the colour of the stole worn by priests in certain churches.

Why violet? To remind us that the soldiers clothed Jesus in a purple cloak when they tortured him (Mark 15:17-20; John 19:2-3).

Violet is a sombre colour which in some churches has come to symbolise mourning, suffering, humility and repentance. It also has a hint of vibrant colour deep within it, promising rich life to come.

Could a violet cloth be draped across the communion table or the lectern for the period of Lent? Then, on Easter Sunday it could be replaced by one or more cloths of bright yellows, greens, reds, etc? This could have a visual impact after 40 days of the violet colour, adding to the overall impact of the service.



Rough Stones

Many churches today use stones in a variety of contexts as symbols. They can be appropriate at Lent, if they are rough, rather than polished and beautiful.

Why could rough stones be appropriate? To remind us that Jesus went out into the wilderness where the landscape is parched and the surface is covered with loose, rough stones; there is no sand in the Judean wilderness, unlike in the Sahara Desert. The stones are a symbol of desolation, misery and harshness.

We also note that the devil used these rough stones to tempt Jesus: 'If you are the Son of God, command that these stones become loaves of bread' (Matthew 4:3). However, Jesus made them a symbol for overcoming temptation when he replied, 'One does not live on bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God' (Matthew 4:4).

**Could something be made of this symbol of a rocky wilderness in a tableau in the church during Lent – to be removed on Easter Sunday? Perhaps replaced then by fresh flowers, symbolising a healthy, growing, joyful garden?
This may appeal to some creative members of the church.**

See also this video about creating an Easter Garden:

<http://request.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/REquest-Easter-Garden-Final-v1.mp4>

Lent Possibilities for Community Outreach



a) Traditionally, the money saved from fasting or other expressions of self-denial is given to others whose needs are greater than ours.

Perhaps, if pleasures from which people abstain normally involve spending money, the money saved can be given to a local charity supported by the church?



Pretzels

Pretzels had their origin in early Christian practice during Lent. As part of the abstinence from luxury, among the monks at least, fat, eggs and milk were forbidden. At some point, probably in the early 7th century, the legend is that one monk, in order to reward his students for learning their prayers, dreamed up a type of bread that was made with only flour, salt and water. He had strips of this kind of bread baked, and then he had the strips twisted together to resemble arms crossed in prayer.

One tradition says he called them *pretiola*, which is Latin for 'little rewards'. Another tradition says he called them *braceiae*, the Latin term for 'little arms'. The latter tradition may be supported by the fact that in German-speaking Europe the pronunciation for one of these little breads became *bretzel*, from a word meaning an arm. In turn, in English, this became the word 'pretzel'.

The traditions also state that the monk claimed that the three holes of the pretzel represent the Trinity. During the Middle Ages in Europe, monks gave away pretzels to the poor, serving as a visual symbol of the Trinity and also as a basic food. Because of this, they became a popular food during Lent, and eventually became a general snack food at some point in the 19th century.

(Perhaps pretzels could be given out to people as they arrive in church for the first Lent service, or after the first Lent service, with tea / coffee? An explanation of the symbolism could be provided during the service.)

**Perhaps you could have a pretzel-making session one afternoon early in Lent?
Invite people in the community to come and take part, making new friends?
There could be a pretzel judging competition, inviting people and those with young children in the community to join in for the fun of it?**

Perhaps Lent could be a good time to start a food bank at the church, including pretzels among the first foods? Or perhaps members could be encouraged to become volunteers at an existing food bank, including taking pretzels to their first session? This might develop into an ongoing commitment.