



Lent: a teachers' guide

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Introduction

This guide has been produced by Westminster Abbey to be used in conjunction with the primary or secondary short guides to Lent. Within this guide, you will find key information on the Christian festival of Lent, to support the delivery of Religious Education within your classroom.

Westminster Abbey has a distinctive role within the Church of England. It is neither a cathedral nor a parish church, and it stands outside the normal jurisdiction of bishops and archbishops. It is instead a 'Royal Peculiar', which was a status granted to it in 1560 by Elizabeth I, under which the Dean and Chapter are directly answerable to the Sovereign. This resource discusses Lent in broad terms based on the teachings of the Abbey.

All Bible references are taken from the New Revised Standard Version.

What is Lent?

Lent is a period of 40 days in the Christian calendar, not including Sundays.

Christians use this time to reflect on the time Jesus spent in the wilderness at the start of his ministry and the events leading up to the crucifixion. The term 'the Temptation of Christ' is commonly used to describe the 40 days and nights in the Judaeian desert when Satan (the Devil) tried to tempt Jesus into sin.

In Christianity it is believed that sin is when we act in a different way to God or disobey God.

When is Lent?

Western churches observe Lent over 40 days starting on the 7th Wednesday before Easter Day (called Ash Wednesday). Lent culminates in Holy Week, when the focus of the festival turns to the crucifixion (on Good Friday) and resurrection (on Easter Sunday). In this resource, we also discuss Shrove Tuesday, the day before Ash Wednesday when many Christians begin their preparations for Lent.

How is Lent celebrated?

Within the Church, Lent is celebrated through special services to honour key holy days such as Ash Wednesday. Traditionally, Christians mark Lent by fasting, both from certain foods and festivities for 40

days, as Christ had to in the desert. Many from more orthodox and traditional denominations will still observe the fast strictly, abstaining from meat, fish, eggs and fats until Easter Sunday.

Many people observe this period by 'giving up' vices or treats, such as chocolate. However, there has been a move in recent years to 'take up' something, such as extra Bible reading, prayer times or helping at a homeless shelter. Special Lent study groups often take place and special Lent books are published. Christians mark the season of Lent with an increase in prayer and worship.

You may want to mention the Stations of the Cross. The Stations of the Cross is a walk that allows for reflection and re-enactment of Jesus' final journey, when he carried his cross to Golgotha, the place of his crucifixion. By taking part in the Stations of the Cross, some Christians feel that they have accompanied Jesus on his final journey and shared in his suffering.

Shrove Tuesday

In order to emulate Jesus' time in the desert, Christians often wish to remove certain food items from the house prior to Lent. Rather than wasting it, much of this food is consumed on the Tuesday before Ash Wednesday – Shrove Tuesday. This practice resulted in the French name Mardi Gras ('Fat Tuesday'). Pancakes became associated with Shrove Tuesday as they are a dish that can use up all the eggs, fats and milk in the house with just the addition of flour.

Shrove Tuesday gets its name from the ritual of 'shriving'. This 1,000-year-old practice involves a person confessing their sins and receiving absolution for them before Lent begins.

Ash Wednesday

Lent begins on Ash Wednesday, when Christians think about the sins of the previous year and atone for them. They believe that Jesus will forgive their sins and free them from them.

Many Christians will attend Ash Wednesday services and be marked with a cross of ashes on their forehead. The ash carries many meanings, including that without God humans are nothing but ashes and dust and of course, the symbol of the cross itself. The words, 'Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return' are stated within an Ash Wednesday service.

The ashes are made from the burnt palm leaves from the previous year's Palm Sunday service.

Mothering Sunday

Each Sunday during Lent is celebrated with a special service. Mothering Sunday, as it is popularly known, is the fourth Sunday of Lent and is often used to celebrate mothers and care givers. Employers traditionally gave servants this day off to visit family. It was also the day when people traditionally returned to their 'mother church' - the church in which a Christian was baptised. This happens midway through the period of Lent and is also a day of respite from fasting.

Your students may recognise this as a more consumer-focused event with retail outlets promoting 'Mother's Day' through the giving of gifts and cards.

Useful Bible passages for the study of Lent

The Bible itself does not use the word Lent. However, the 40 days in the desert where Jesus fasted and had to battle against the temptations of Satan are discussed in the St Matthew 4: 1-11, St Mark 1: 12-15 and St Luke 4: 1-13.

Finding out more

You can find examples of previous sermons covering Lent on the [Westminster Abbey](#) website. These give an indication of how Lent is discussed within the Church and how Christians are encouraged to use Lent as a period of their own reflection. The website also provides a [virtual tour](#) of the Abbey which may provide context for the supporting imagery provided in the Power Point presentation.

The last week of Lent is called Holy Week, which includes Palm Sunday, Maundy Thursday and Good Friday. You may wish to continue your teaching with our [other Christian festivals teaching resources](#), which examine Holy Week and Eastertide in the same way.

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