

Lent is the period of 40 days before Easter in the Christian calendar; it is a time of reflection for many Christians as they prepare to remember and celebrate the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

What is Lent?

For some, Lent is a 40 day period of giving up chocolate, caffeine, sugar or something else after Pancake Day. Traditionally, it’s seen as a time in which to reflect upon the life and death of Jesus. However much we already know about Lent, the story of Lent is one which reminds us of why it is marked by so many around the world.

The arrival of Lent is characterised by pancakes! Shrove Tuesday, a day highly anticipated by all pancake lovers, is traditionally a day of preparation before the season of Lent begins. The 40 days of Lent represent the [40 days that Jesus spent in the wilderness](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Luke%204%3A1-13) at the start of his ministry. Jesus fasted during his time in the wilderness, and so Christians identify with his suffering by abstaining from particular foods during this time, including meat, fish, milk and egg products.

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

Starting Lent

Lent begins on Ash Wednesday, a day of penitence or cleansing of the soul. Many Christians will attend Lent services, and be marked with a cross of ashes on their forehead. This is a sign of mortality, based upon the idea from the book of Genesis that humankind came into the world from dust and will return to it. It is a time to express sorrow over sin, and a reminder that Jesus brings freedom from sin. The following 40 days are an opportunity to remember Jesus’ death.

[Mothering Sunday](http://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/what-you-can-do/your-church/pray-worship-reflect/worship/mothering-sunday) occurs on the fourth Sunday of Lent, which many use as an opportunity to celebrate mothers, but also all who care for us. Mothering Sunday is thought to originate from when individuals returned to their mother church, typically a main church or cathedral of the area. It further developed when servants were allowed Mothering Sunday off to return home to their mother church and would often take a rare opportunity to see family.

Holy Week

Lent culminates in Holy Week. Holy Week begins with Palm Sunday, a day which commemorates Jesus’ triumphant procession into Jerusalem on a donkey. In many churches the congregation are given palm crosses, whilst others wave palm branches. Occasionally a donkey is paraded near (or even in!) a church.

The Thursday before Easter is Holy Thursday, or Maundy Thursday. It is a reminder of the last meal Jesus ate with his disciples, washing their feet and leading them in the first ever Eucharist. He foretold his death; drawing a direct parallel between the bread and his body, and the wine and his blood. The following day is Good Friday, a day commemorating Jesus’ death on the cross. It is a day of mourning, when we remember the suffering and pain of Christ. The service on this day provides an opportunity for solemn reflection.

Easter Sunday

The calculation of the end of Lent has varied considerably in Christian history, with different Church traditions taking different approaches. If you count 40 days after Shrove Tuesday then Palm Sunday would be the 40th day. It is now usual in the West to count the last day of Lent as Easter Saturday, since the first Christians tended not to fast on Sundays as they should be a day of celebration of Jesus’ resurrection. Thus making Easter Saturday the 40th day.

On Easter Sunday, the Church celebrates Jesus' resurrection. Fasts are finished, chocolate Easter eggs consumed, and the resurrection foreshadows the renewal of creation. Good Friday is so called because the death of Christ, as terrible as it was, led to the resurrection, which brought new life to those who believe. Good Friday challenges mere human goodness – it is the nature of Jesus’ sacrifice that overcomes the weakness of humanity. Some Churches will light a paschal candle to represent the eternal presence of Jesus, as he rises from the dead.

The story of Lent is one of sadness and joy; a story which is still celebrated in diverse ways throughout the world today.