

Q. What is Lent? What is important to know going into it? Should I be giving something up?

Lent is fast approaching, and now is a good time to start considering this opportunity for renewal and re-connection. The word “Lent” comes from an old English word for “Spring,” which is a helpful starting place when considering what Lent is, what Lent is not, and what we might consider in the next few weeks before Lent begins. In its most basic definition, the season of Lent is the 40 days (not including Sundays) which precede the celebration of Easter. Modelled on the story of Jesus spending 40 Days in the wilderness following his baptism and before beginning his public ministry, this block of time is preparation for entering into the mystery of Easter.

One of the most well-known ways of observing Lent has been through the adoption of a particular discipline, or ‘giving something up.’ Chocolate, caffeine and meat are popular items to forego during this season. Because these are seen as indulgences which give flavour and enjoyment to our daily lives, it has long been assumed that Lent is actually about being miserable for Jesus, adopting a piety that allows us to make visible the ways in which good Christians are willing to suffer for their faith. The accompanying assumption is that God likes to see us squirm a little -- the degree to which we deny ourselves is the degree to which we make God happy.

When we consider Lent as Spring, however, the viewpoint changes. Lent is a time of renewal and regeneration. Rather than a time in which we do something to please God, instead, Lent becomes another one of God’s gifts to us – an invitation to claim some space, or create some space, to focus on the things which (or The One who) truly gives us life. Some examples of Christian practices of renewal:

-**Almsgiving** – it is easy to spend money mindlessly, to consume food that is bad for us, entertainment that numbs us, to buy things that we don’t need. Commit yourself to giving a certain amount of extra money away during Lent – to the church, to a cause you believe in, to someone in need, to The Water Project – and then spend the smaller amount of money you have left with mindfulness and gratitude.

-**Service** – our lives become cluttered with obligations, appointments, chaos and stress. Make a choice to do something for others during Lent, to take on a project or service that is over and above what you normally do. What do you need to let go of in order to do this? How does this project give you life and energy?

-**Worship & Education** – Lent began in the church as a season of catechism – that is teaching. It was a time in which Christians made a particular point of learning and growing in their faith, of making time for both spiritual and mental renewal, for nourishing the brain and the soul. You can join us for our Super Tuesdays, 6-8pm. We share together in a meal, and then we offer learning and/or activities for people of all ages, including an adult study which connects the wisdom of our faith tradition into the hopes and challenges and needs of our own lives. Beginning Feb. 25th, Wednesdays at 10:45am at St. Thomas’ with our own Bishop Walter will be offering a simple Eucharistic service with study. *Call our office to order your copy of our Lenten study book “Being Christian”.

-Consumer Choice – rather than giving something up, try changing your consumption habits to more clearly reflect your values and beliefs. Buy locally. Eat food that was produced in a 100 mile radius. Or commit to fair-trade coffee and chocolate.

-Giving Something Up – Giving up meat or dessert, caffeine or alcohol, is still a viable Lenten option, just be clear about why you're doing it. If foregoing a luxury moves you to be more compassionate for those who have less, or if you simply want to create enough of a break in your regular patterns of consumption so that you can once again appreciate the blessings of this life, then go for it.

Lent begins on **February 18th with Ash Wednesday**. Between now and then, consider how you want to observe Lent 2015. These questions may help you in your decision-making: *Where does my life feel out of kilter? Where do I feel lost or hurting? What do I most want/need to receive from God right now? What questions are most persistent in my faith life?* With this in mind, give careful, prayerful consideration to where and how you might create the space or practices in which to bring these needs, hopes, and questions before God over the course of these 40 Days.