

Question of the Week:

How did pancakes and the church collide into the tradition of Pancake Tuesday?

I have, in a previous “Question of the Week,” described a number of possibilities for individuals to consider in preparing for the season of Lent – everything from giving something up, to taking something on, to simply making more conscientious consumer choices. However, flexibility has not always been a Lenten hallmark; in particular times and places within the Christian culture, certain Lenten disciplines were not considered optional. For example, it has often been the case that Christians would reduce or eliminate meat from their diets for the forty days. This practice had a very practical element to it: because Lent coincides with spring, and because spring is, in the natural world, a time for mating, procreating, regeneration of the species, it made sense that human beings would ‘give the animals a break,’ recognizing that it was in everybody’s best interest to allow that regeneration to take place. It was also the case that Christians, across the board, would adopt a spare and simple Lenten diet. More traditional Christians would, and in some cases still do, eliminate sugars and oils as a means of drawing the spirit into a fuller sense of gratitude for these things we come to take for granted, as well as to move the heart with compassion for those whose regular existence is geared more toward survival than pleasure. On top of this, Ash Wednesday, the day following Lent, was a fast day. Fasting – abstaining from eating for a day, or a portion of a day – is one of those spiritual practices that transcends religious and cultural boundaries. All major world religions recognize the validity of the choice for temporary hunger as a way of drawing closer to God.

Shrove Tuesday – or “Fat” Tuesday or “Mardi Gras” – became a response to the religious realities of Lent. It was a practical necessity that the pantry be properly cleansed, that all temptations be removed from the household, before the 40 day change of routine. The Tuesday before Lent began, then, was a time for feasting and indulgence, for using up the oils and the meats and sugars, and thereby being ready for starting fresh the following day. It isn’t surprising that the indulging has proven to be much more wildly popular than the fasting on which its existence is based. People throughout the world, Christian or not, have a wonderful time celebrating the Tuesday preceding Lent, and in many cultures the indulgence takes on a carnival character, with behaviours far beyond pantry-clearing permitted and encouraged. In Canada, our celebrations are relatively tame. Many churches mark the day with a pancake supper – a Canadian way of enjoying one last meal of refined carbs, high-fat proteins, and most importantly, maple syrup.

St. George’s holds our pancake supper on Shrove Tuesday too, February 17th, and like all of our dinners here, this one is delicious, fun, and relaxed. Although it doesn’t help us clear out our individual pantries for Lent, it does give us opportunity to reflect on the Lenten season before us as we are partaking of the feast.