

Christian Perspectives

A couple of weeks past, many of us had pancakes for supper on a Tuesday evening. That is not the usual fare around my house and it may not be at yours. Why did we do this? In the southern part of the U.S.A. and in South America, this festival is often called ?Mardi Gras.? Roughly translated, it means ?fat Tuesday.? While that gives it a name, it does not explain the tradition. What are the roots of this tradition? Why do we continue to celebrate it?

In the Christian Church of the middle centuries and in the main line churches of today, the year is divided up into seasons which give form and content to worship and spiritual practices. We all know about festivals such as Christmas and Easter but other titles such as the season of Advent and Lent may not be so familiar. Christmas Day is a fixed feast day. It is always December 25. Easter is called a moveable feast which means it is on a different Sunday each year. So let's start with Easter. The date of Easter is determined first by the Spring Equinox which this year falls on March 20 and is always very close to that date. Once the equinox is passed, look for a full moon. The Sunday following that full moon will be Easter.

Count back six Sundays from Easter, and Pancake Day will be the Tuesday before that Sunday. It falls on the day before the church season of Lent, leading up to Easter, begins on Ash Wednesday. Lent is an old English word meaning ?spring.? Lent is meant to be a solemn period of reflection, study, self-denial and increased generosity to those in need. In the early church, new Christians studied in the period leading up to Easter so that they could confess their faith and be baptized at the Easter Eve or Vigil worship. Perhaps you have heard friends talk about giving something up for Lent. It is a form of self-denial when we do without something that we like to have or to do. This is done in solidarity with others who have suffered or are currently suffering due to hardship and injustice. Many churches or ministerial groups offer short courses of study during Lent.

Since the roots of the Christian faith are in Judaism, some of the festivals and seasons follow a similar pattern. In the spring, those who are Jewish commemorate Passover. Passover relates to the story of the centuries in which the Hebrew people were slaves in Egypt. God chose Moses to lead the people to freedom but first he had to persuade the Pharaoh to let them go. The final plague which God levied on the Egyptians was to kill the first born of all animals and humans in the land. According to the story, God passed over the first born of the Hebrew people and they were allowed to live but they had to leave very quickly. There was not time to allow the dough prepared for the next day's bread to rise so they had to bake it as unleavened bread and eat it in a hurry. During Passover, even today, Jewish families do not eat baked goods that have been leavened. On the eve of Passover, all the leavening materials in a household have to be used up. The Christian season of Lent begins after a symbolic purging of similar leavening materials by using them up making pancakes. ?Mardi Gras? or fat Tuesday is a full out festival that precedes a time of austerity in Lent, ?the ?fat? being rich leavening material which would not be needed after that day.

Many Lenten traditions developed in the early churches of the countries of Europe. The fasting in Lent may have actually been less spiritual and more practical. In the colder northern winters stocks of food would be getting low as spring approached. It would be a wise move to eat more austere, perhaps even giving up meat to ensure there would be enough herd animals available for the coming seasons. Whether practical or spiritual, the season of Lent invites us to be more aware of need around us, of our own spiritual poverty and of our mortality. It is a time to reflect on our priorities and to reaffirm why we are followers of Jesus Christ and how we live that conviction. In that spirit, using the words of the Anglican service for Ash Wednesday, ?I invite you therefore, to observe a holy Lent by self-examination, penitence, prayer, fasting, and almsgiving, and by reading and meditating on the word of God.?

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