

The Lengthening of the Days

Lent this year starts quite late: Ash Wednesday, which has been the first day of Lent since the latter half of the seventh century, falls on 6 March. For about three hundred years before that, Lent always started on a Sunday, half a week later. And before that again, the period of penitential preparation for Easter was no more than the time from Good Friday to Easter Day, or at most the preceding week, which we now call Holy Week. But we are used to the longer stretch which, since its establishment, has always been conceived of as a spiritual commemoration of Christ's forty days in the wilderness. The present arrangement gives us forty fasting days before Easter because Sundays – which are never fasting days – need to be discounted in the arithmetic. The problem of not being able to count Sundays within the forty-day total was why, in the seventh century, the extra half-week was added to the front of Lent to make the numbers right.

When Lent begins and ends depends, of course, on the variable date of Easter, which in 2019 is almost as late as it can be: 21 April. The latest possible date is 25 April, with the earliest being 22 March. If Easter is early, the beginning of Lent is pushed back into February, sometimes quite a long way back. But however Lent falls, for those of us in the more northern parts of Europe in particular, it runs over a six week period when we really notice the way the days are lengthening and things are beginning to grow. In the agricultural world of Anglo-Saxon England, where an open fire was the only source of heat, and firelight and precious candles were the only source of light, this striking lengthening of days in the six weeks before Easter, regardless of when precisely that was in any given year, was eagerly anticipated and it had a huge impact on people's daily lives. The church, using its language of Latin, officially called the season *Quadragesima*, the forty-day season, and focused on its penitential nature. But for the people of Anglo-Saxon England it was above all the weeks when the days grew longer. Their name for the season, out there in the everyday world, was 'the lengthening' (meaning 'the lengthening of the days'): *Lencten* in Anglo-Saxon, from the verb *lengan*, 'to lengthen'. It is this word that we are using when we refer to the liturgical season of Lent. It is no more and no less than the Anglo-Saxons' normal word for what we call 'Spring' – itself an Anglo-Saxon word, but not used as the name for the season of the year until centuries after the Norman Conquest. When Spring replaced Lent as the name of one of the four seasons, Lent lived on as the common name for the season in the church's liturgy.

In those parts of Europe where the local language developed from Latin, the names for this liturgical season were derived from *Quadragesima*: for example, French *carême*, and Italian *quaresima*. An alternative approach, as in Germany, is to give the forty days a name that reflects the dominant practice of fasting (*Fasten/Fastenzeit*). It was only in Anglo-Saxon England that in everyday speech the liturgical season was named after the season of the year in which it falls. It stuck, and became the church's official name for the season once English replaced Latin following the Reformation.

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