

Let the Seasons speak



The Medieval Church in Europe aligned the church's liturgical year with the seasons. Four of the great Festivals, referred to as the "Quarter Days", were explicitly linked to the Equinoxes, when the sun crosses the celestial equator and day and night are of equal length or the Solstices, when the sun reaches its highest or lowest point in the sky at noon, marking the longest and shortest days. The Quarter Days were: the Feast of the Annunciation, linked to the Spring Equinox (the start of Spring); the Feast of St John the Baptist linked to the Summer Solstice (Midsummer); the Feast of St Michael and All Angels linked to the Autumn Equinox (the beginning of Autumn); and the Feast of the Nativity (Christmas) linked to the Winter Solstice (Midwinter's Day).

The alignment was deliberate because the church understood that the cycle of the seasons served to reinforce the symbolism of the church's own story. For example, it was after experiencing the darkest period of the winter (mid-winter) that the days gradually grew longer as light returned to the world: so the Christ-child's birth at Christmas would bring light into the darkness of human experience.

On Ash Wednesday, which this year fell on 1st March, we began the church's season of Lent. This is considered within the church to be a period of self-discipline when we voluntarily give things up. The act of giving something up is intended to make ourselves more open to God and more aware of the benefits we normally take for granted. The church took its inspiration for this from the story of Jesus who spent 40 days in the wilderness (or desert) where he was tempted by the devil before he embarked on his work of healing and teaching. Although there are actually 46 days between Ash Wednesday and Easter Sunday, the tradition is to discount the Sundays so there are also 40 days of Lent.

But relating this to the seasons also helps to put Lent into perspective. The word "Lent" is not a religious word; it is the Old English word for Spring in which "Lencten" referred to the lengthening of days that takes place at this time of year. It is simply the fact that Easter always occurred during the Spring in Britain that brought the word into association with this part of the church's calendar. Whilst

today Lent has passed out of use in modern English to refer to the season, it retains its use in the church as the season of preparation for Easter.

Spring in nature is the time of new growth, but for that to happen the seed has first to be buried into the ground. Jesus used this imagery in John's Gospel to refer to his forthcoming death (at Easter): John 12:24 "I tell you the truth, unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds." The "death" of the seed as it was buried in the ground was a necessary precursor to growth and new life; so it is with us - as we "die" by voluntarily embracing self-discipline during Lent it is in the hope that it will be the precursor to our own growth and health.

Nature, and the seasons of the earth, are part of our story and continue to inform what and who we are. Our ancestors understood that, let's hope we continue to do so as well.