



Lent and Easter

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- **The Christian season of Lent starts in 2020 on 26 February, with Easter Day on 12 April**

EASTER

- The Easter story of Jesus crucified and rising from the dead, happened at the time of the Passover in Jerusalem, so the Christian Church celebrates Easter about the same time. The date of the Passover, however, depends on the Jewish lunar year, which is 11 days shorter than a solar year, so, for most of their history, Christians have calculated Easter independently of the Jewish calendar. In 325, the Council of Nicaea established that Easter would be held on the first Sunday after the first full moon occurring on or after the northern hemisphere spring or vernal equinox.
- Since the early Middle Ages, the calculation for this has been named the *computus* (Latin for “computation”) as it was considered the most important computation of the age. It involves applying lunar months to the solar year, calculating “golden numbers” and cross-referencing tables.
- The simple way is to check a lectionary or the Church of England Common Worship book or Book of Common Prayer, which provides a table of calculated dates.

EARLIEST AND LATEST

- The earliest and latest possible dates for Easter are 22 March and 25 April, in the Gregorian calendar. However, in the Orthodox, or Eastern, churches, while those dates are the same, they are reckoned using the Julian calendar: 4 April and 8 May.

WHY NOT FIX THE DATE?

- There have been serious discussions about fixing or unifying the date of Easter involving the Anglican, Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches but no agreement has yet been reached.

LENT AND ADVENT

- Lent and Advent are periods of reflection and preparation (penitential periods) for Christians in the run-up to the most important Christian festivals. Lent reflects the 40 days that Jesus spent fasting in the desert, or wilderness, before starting his public ministry and during which he was tempted by Satan. It begins on Ash Wednesday (26 February this year) and continues until Maundy Thursday or Holy Saturday according to tradition. That is more than 40 days as Sundays (days of rest) are not included.
- Traditionally, Christians have given up things for Lent, eaten more frugally or fasted following Jesus's example in the wilderness. More recently, some have committed to taking up something for Lent, like new studies, doing things differently, sharing Lent lunches or giving to charity.

SHROVE TUESDAY

- Shrove Tuesday is the last day before the penitential period of Lent begins and is traditionally used to finish off anything in the cupboard you are giving up for Lent. Hence, Pancake Day using up the fat, flour, eggs, milk and sugar, with a little lemon juice or maybe maple syrup. Mardi Gras, the French name for Shrove Tuesday meaning Fat Tuesday, extends the tradition of a final night of eating rich, fatty foods into the celebration of carnival commonly associated with New Orleans.

ASH WEDNESDAY

- Ash Wednesday is the first day of Lent, when ashes made from burning palm crosses left over from the previous year are blessed and used to mark crosses on people's foreheads in a custom dating back to the Middle Ages.
- Ash Wednesday services set the tone for Lent, with sombre readings and hymns and a focus on penitence – saying sorry sin for and turning away from it. As they make the cross on a forehead, priests will say: “Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return. Turn away from sin and be faithful to Christ.”

MOTHERING SUNDAY

- The fourth Sunday of Lent is Mothering Sunday. It is also called Laetare Sunday, Refreshment Sunday (a break from Lent), Simnel Sunday or Rose Sunday (clergy of some churches will swap their purple or Lenten vestments for rose-coloured ones). It is not the same as Mother's Day, which began in the United States early in the 20th century.
- Mothering Sunday was traditionally observed as a day for returning to one's mother church: the church where you grew up or were baptised, the local parish church or the nearest cathedral, being the "mother church" of all the churches in the diocese. Later, it became a day when domestic servants were given the day off to visit their home church and see their mothers and families. Today, it is mostly a day to honour mothers.

SIMNEL CAKE

- Simnel cake is a light fruit cake with lots of marzipan originally eaten on the fourth Sunday of Lent/Mothering Sunday, but today more commonly associated with Easter Sunday. It includes two layers of marzipan, one in the middle and one on the top. On the top layer is placed a circle of marzipan egg or balls, lightly browned under a grill. There are either 11 or 12 marzipan balls: 11 traditionally represents the Apostles without Judas, while some go for 12 being Jesus plus the 11 remaining Apostles.
- Simnel cake has made a bit of a comeback recently with some help from well-known bakers.

PASSION SUNDAY

- The fifth Sunday of Lent is celebrated as Passion Sunday in various denominations, notable Anglican, Lutheran and Methodist. It starts the two-week period known as Passiontide.

HOLY WEEK

- Holy Week is the week from Palm Sunday to Easter Sunday.

PALM SUNDAY

- Jesus's entry into Jerusalem has been celebrated on the Sunday before Easter since the early days of Christianity. He entered the city triumphantly with crowds waving palm leaves and spreading them on the path of his donkey as they shouted "Hosanna" in greeting. Christians mark the day with crosses made from palm leaves and public processions, often with donkeys.

MAUNDY THURSDAY

- Christians celebrate the day Jesus shared the Last Supper with his disciples before his death. Maundy Thursday services often include a priest (including the Pope and the Archbishop of Canterbury) washing the feet of the people, as Jesus washed the feet of the disciples, showing that He serves us as we serve him. Some will also share an Agape meal from the Greek for love. Maundy comes from the Latin *mandare*, to command, reflecting Jesus's command to "love one another, as I have loved you".
- On Maundy Thursday, the Queen visits one of the Anglican cathedrals to distribute Maundy Money. Maundy gifts used to include clothes and food but are now specially minted coins. One man and one woman are chosen for each year of the Queen's reign. They receive Maundy Money to the value of that number of years in pence in a white leather purse. They also receive coins to the value of £5.50 in a red leather purse in lieu of the food and clothing once given.

GOOD FRIDAY

- On Good Friday, Christians remember the crucifixion and death of Jesus. This is the most sombre day of the Easter period. The altar has been stripped of all ornaments, the cross covered with a sack or draped in red cloth. Christians may join a walk of witness through their area, attend a three-hour devotional service of readings, talk and hymns or work their way through the Stations of the Cross, a series of depictions of the events of Good Friday with devotions and prayers.

EASTER DAY

- Easter Sunday sees Christians celebrating the resurrection as Jesus died for our sins and rose again on the third day. The altar is decorated in white or gold, the flowers return to the church after the stark days of Lent, there may be an Easter garden on view celebrating the empty tomb and the service is happy and joyful, with the feel of a party. There may even be Easter eggs, said to symbolise new life, Jesus's resurrection from the tomb or, maybe, the rock rolled away to open the tomb. People have been decorating eggs for Easter since the 13th century, which may have been because they were one of the things you did not eat during Lent. Chocolate eggs may be just as important to those who give up chocolate for Lent.

HOLY SATURDAY

- This is often referred to as Easter Saturday. It is not, however, the day before Easter but a week later – at the end of Easter Week. Holy Saturday may end with an Easter vigil, waiting for the resurrection, as the first service of Easter. This generally includes the lighting of the Easter candle from an outdoor fire, bringing the light not a darkened church and the congregation lighting their candles from that light.

EASTER WEEK

- Easter does not end on Easter Day or even Easter Monday, a bank holiday in the UK. Eastertide continues for 50 days and includes Ascension Day, marking Jesus's ascension into heaven 40 days after the Resurrection, and ending at Pentecost (what used to be called Whit Sunday) when Christians celebrate the gift of the Holy Spirit, the third part of the Holy Trinity with God and Jesus, and the birth of the Christian Church. That day, as the Apostles and other followers of Jesus celebrated the Pentecost, the Holy Spirit descended on them with the sound of a strong wind and with tongues of flame and they could suddenly speak in various languages.

MORE INFORMATION

- [Church of England press office](#)
- [Catholic Communications Network](#)
- [Methodist Church press office](#)
- [Alec Ryrie](#), Professor of the History of Christianity Durham
- [Candida Moss](#), Edward Cadbury Professor of Theology, University of Birmingham