

Moravian Women's Association - Home and Overseas Paper - March 2017

Lent around the world

By the time your Circle is reading this paper, we shall be well into the season of Lent 2017. We associate Lent with 40 days of self-denial as an aid to spiritual renewal. Here is a short summary of how Lent is celebrated (or not) in different countries and cultures around the world.

The eastern orthodox and western churches do not even agree about dates. In other cultures there is indifference (Asia), there is difficulty in Africa, and avoidance in Latin America. Lent among Protestants is a rarer thing outside the UK than you might expect.

East and West

Both the eastern orthodox and the western churches observe Lent but they count the 40 days differently. The western church excludes Sundays (which are celebrated as the day of Christ's resurrection) whereas the eastern orthodox church includes them. The churches also start Lent on different days. Western churches start Lent on the 7th Wednesday before Easter Day (called Ash Wednesday). Eastern churches start Lent on the Monday of the 7th week before Easter and end it on the Friday 9 days before Easter.

Self-denial and survival in Africa

In the mostly Muslim country of Guinea, fasting is popular, but not always a choice. Lent is not observed by many denominations. *"A significant section of the population struggles to get together two meals a day, so the benefits of self-denial of food would become lost in ill health!"* says a British Missionary Society (BMS) worker in the country. Lent as a way of setting aside distractions from the spiritual life doesn't work well when people are concerned with survival and getting by, while meeting family obligations.

Christians in Guinea however fast more regularly than may be common in the UK, some fasting every week. *"Guinean Christians' spiritual life is very vigorous and immediate, and prayer becomes a very active and physical expression of people's innermost desires, hurts, struggles and uncertainties. Fasting is a natural part of this."*

Ashes on foreheads in the Middle East

Crosses are drawn on the foreheads of some Christian groups in Lebanon using the ashes of palm-leaf crosses from the previous year's Palm Sunday celebrations - a symbol that is worn throughout the Lent period. But Evangelicals emphasise Lent less and most Lebanese Muslims are entirely unaware of it. *"Many locals would not really consider the Christian practice of giving something up for Lent as fasting,"* says a BMS worker in Beirut.

Carnival and the Catholic – Protestant divide in Latin America

"Lent is seen as a Catholic tradition, and therefore inappropriate for Evangelical Christians," reports BMS from Brazil. *"In practice, it is not even talked about among most Evangelical Christians, meeting either ignorance or indifference. Sadly, Palm Sunday is forgotten, so is Good Friday, as these are considered 'Catholic'."*

Such sensitivities, so foreign in ecumenical Britain, are also felt in Peru. *"Lent is mostly ignored by the Evangelical Church because it is very much the domain of the Catholic Church,"* says a BMS worker. *"There is a great concern to not appear Catholic. It seems a shame that it has not as yet been possible to take what is good from the Catholic tradition and re-appropriate it in the life of the Evangelical Church."*

Many Evangelicals across Latin America go on retreat to avoid the raucous parties associated with festivals such as Carnival which is traditionally a pre-Lent celebration.

Nepal

Lent is not so much avoided as ignored in countries like Nepal, according to BMS workers there.

Holy Week

The many different Holy Week traditions, celebrations, processions and re-enactments around the world are too numerous to detail. The most flamboyant, from Spain and Italy, were exported to South America, and are associated with the Catholic Church. In the western churches, pre-Christian elements have been incorporated, such as Easter eggs. Most western countries have a public holiday or two at Easter, which has promoted the secular Easter egg and bunny celebrations.

With thanks for material from the British Missionary Society.

Naomi Hancock