

The Gesima Sundays

In 1954 the Poet Laureate John Betjeman (1906 – 1984) published a poem entitled ‘Septuagesima’. This work gave him, he said, ‘the chance [for] me, / To praise our dear old C of E’. His lyrical pen defined, ‘The Church of England of my birth, / The kindest Church to me on earth’. In praise for ‘the Church of his birth’ he continued, ‘There may be those who much resent / Priest, Liturgy, and Sacrament, / Whose worship is what they call ‘free’, / Well, let them be so, but for me / there’s refuge in the C of E’. Moving on to ‘the last things’, he continued, ‘And when it comes that I must die / I hope the Vicar’s standing by, / I won’t care if he’s ‘Low’ or ‘High’ / For he’ll be there to aid my soul / On that dread journey to its goal’. Obviously believing that his death was still some years ahead, he added, ‘But this is all anticipating / Septuagesima – time of waiting’. Waiting, but, waiting for what?

The Church gives us the forty days of Lent to prepare for the Easter joys of Christ’s resurrection. The number forty calls to mind the period of temptation Jesus endured in the desert before Satan and the time that Our Lord spent giving his final instructions to his disciples before his Ascension. It was also the number of days that it rained on Noah’s ark, the days that Moses spent on Mount Sinai before God, the years that the Israelites sojourned in the wilderness before God allowed them to enter Canaan, the period that Eli was a judge in Israel and the length of King David’s reign. However, in addition to these forty days of preparation for Easter, the Prayer Book gives us nearly three weeks to prepare for Lent.

The calendar for the Church’s year is derived in part from events with fixed dates but also from those which rely on astronomical observations. For example, the date of the Feast of the Nativity of Our Lord (or the Birth-day of Christ, commonly called Christmas Day) always occurs on 25th December, regardless of which day of the week that is. The day on which it falls determines the start of Advent, which can range from 27th November, if Christmas Day falls on a Sunday, to 3rd December, if it is on a Saturday. The First Sunday in Advent is always that which is closest to the Feast of Saint Andrew (30th November). The dating of Ash Wednesday, the first day of Lent, is dependent on the date of Easter. Since this latter can range between 22nd March and 25th April, the consequent date for the first day of Lent must fall between 4th February and 10th March. Septuagesima Sunday, set three Sundays before Ash

Wednesday, varies from 18th January, where it follows one or two Sundays after the Epiphany, to 21st February, allowing six or seven Sundays after the Epiphany.

This all begs the question: why, for Prayer Book Anglicans, does Mother Church deem it necessary to have three weeks of preparation before the start of Lent, with her so-called Gesima Sundays? These comprise: Septuagesima (typically 70 days before Easter), Sexagesima (60 days) and Quinquagesima (50 days) – the First Sunday in Lent is sometimes referred to as Quadragesima (40 days).

There is a consistent theme in the Collects for the Gesima Sundays. On Septuagesima we are reminded that we, ‘are justly punished for our offences’ and yet, ‘mercifully delivered by thy goodness’; on Sexagesima, even as we prepare for the disciplines of Lent, we confess, ‘that we put not our trust in anything that we do’; and on Quinquagesima, the Collect reminds us that, ‘all our doings without charity are nothing worth’, surely all *aides-memoire* to our determination to be fruitful in our Lenten disciplines.

The Epistles for these three Sundays all come from Saint Paul’s letters to the Christian Church in Corinth. On Septuagesima we are reminded that, regardless of how many competitors there are in the race, only one receives the prize, ‘every man that striveth for the mastery [must be] temperate in all things’, to, ‘obtain an incorruptible crown’; surely the ultimate accolade of a successful Lent. For Sexagesima we may read a comprehensive catalogue of the many sufferings Paul endured as a Minister of Christ. Christians are thereby reminded that following Our Lord does not necessarily lead to a quiet and peaceful life. On Quinquagesima we are blessed with the recitation of Paul’s great paean of praise to love, the greatest of the three Christian virtues. Is there a pattern here? As someone who expected to witness the Parousia in his lifetime, Paul reminded his readers that they must work towards a place in the Kingdom of God, for an incorruptible crown. They must be prepared to suffer in this world for the ultimate joy of receiving divine love in the next.

Similarly, the Gospels of the three named Sundays are rich in suggestions for our Lenten preparations. On Septuagesima we hear the call to enter into the labour of Lent: ‘Go ye also into the vineyard, and whatsoever is right I will give you’. This will most assuredly be Paul’s ‘incorruptible crown’ if we take on the rigours of work in the vineyard, which is an allegory for our Lenten endeavours. On Sexagesima, we hear the parable of the sower. We are urged to

have hearts which are ‘good ground’ and which ‘bring forth fruit with patience’. This reference to fruit is echoed in the 1662 Communion Service, appointed to be used on the First Day of Lent, ‘where we are besought to seek to bring forth worthy fruits of penance’. On Quinquagesima, we are told, ‘Behold, we go up to Jerusalem’, and we hear the account of the Lord giving sight to the blind. We may use this miracle to remind us to seek the renewal of an inner light to guide us through Lent.

By contrast, the Gospels for the Sundays after the Feast of the Epiphany offer us some of the miraculous episodes in Jesus’ ministry. Those for the first four are: (1) the miracle of the distraught parents finding their child in the Temple after three days of searching, (2) the supply of copious volumes of wine at the marriage at Cana in Galilee, (3) the healing of a leper and the centurion’s servant, and (4) the stilling of the storm and the curing of two demon-possessed individuals (two according to Matthew, only one mentioned by Mark and Luke). These are all wondrous and exciting miracles, but are hardly events that lead us naturally into the quiet, peaceful solemnity of our preparation for Our Lord’s Passion. Archbishop Thomas Cranmer, following a long tradition in the Church’s calendar, decided, rightly, to continue to offer worshippers a transition period of three Sundays to allow them to descend from hearing about Jesus at his most miraculous to thinking about him in a more contemplative and penitent frame of mind.

The Prayer Book’s reflective progression towards the meditative mood of Lent is in sharp contrast to the Propers offered by the *Revised Common Lectionary*, so loved by Churches which espouse the plenitude of ‘modern’ rites available within *Common Worship*. Here, regardless of the date of Ash Wednesday, the Sundays after the Epiphany continue, until terminated by one, single ‘Sunday before Lent’. This is referred to as Transfiguration Sunday, and offers, in its three year cycle, the synoptic evangelists’ accounts of that event. By long tradition the *Book of Common Prayer* calendar keeps the Feast of the Transfiguration on 6th August, and, although it provides no Eucharistic Propers for that day, it does offer lections for Morning and Evening Prayer. Why the compilers of the *Revised Common Lectionary* found it justifiable to allow just two days of Shrovetide, and for these to follow directly after the Feast of the Transfiguration, is unexplained. Did they, perhaps, with this account of the glorification of the living Jesus, before the beginning of Lent, wish to give a distant foretelling of the transfigurative power of God over the body of his dead Son, which would be witnessed by the Church on Easter Day, after the conclusion of Lent? Did they simply think that forty days of

preparation for Easter were sufficient, without the need for a preliminary three weeks? But, why transfer the Feast of the Transfiguration from its traditional date of 6th August? We may never know.

It certainly seems more fitting to have the three weeks of preliminary reflection that the Prayer Book offers in its Gesima Sundays before Lent begins, so that we have a sort of short Preparation for a longer Preparation. It's another fine example of 'New does not necessarily mean better'!

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