

Keeping Lent with Children and Young People: A Few Ideas

Given the themes of Lent, it's perhaps not immediately obvious how to keep it in ways that are meaningful and appropriate for children and young people. So, here are a few suggestions. I'm sure most of them won't be new to you, but I hope one or two might be useful. There is a range of suggestions, because different things will work for different families.

Shrove Tuesday (Pancake Day)

Shrove Tuesday is the day before Lent. Traditionally, households used up all milk, eggs and fat before fasting from them (and from meat) for the next 40 days. These ingredients were made into pancakes, hence 'Pancake Day'. You could mark Shrove Tuesday with pancakes, or have a slap-up meal of some other sort!



Ash Wednesday

Ash Wednesday is the first day of Lent. If you won't be going to one of the services at church, you could mark Ash Wednesday at home, by making the sign of the cross in ash on each other's foreheads. For the ash, you could collect any palm crosses leftover from last year and burn them in a metal bowl or saucepan, then mix the ash with a tiny bit of vegetable oil. Or you could use some mud.

In my family, when we mark Ash Wednesday at home, we start with the story of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness. It's not a story that appears in many children's Bibles so, if you have young children, you might need to tell the story in your own words. A few objects can help: for the desert, use some sand from the sandpit if you have one, or a piece of sand-coloured cloth; then for the three temptations, you could use some stones, some wooden blocks to symbolise the temple, and a globe, map or atlas to symbolise the world Satan offers to Jesus.

You might like to discuss the story with open questions like these: I wonder what the story makes you think about, or what it reminds you of? I wonder how it makes you feel? I wonder what questions it makes you ask? I wonder which bit was the hardest for Jesus?

With older children, you might then like to say the prayer of self-examination and confession used in church. You can find it here: <https://tinyurl.com/4wpcv5cr>. It is a wonderful prayer.



For the ashing, we usually take it in turns to mark each other's foreheads with the sign of the cross in ash/mud. The words used in church are, 'Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return. Turn away from sin and be faithful to Christ.' You could

use other words, like 'Remember that God made you, and that God loves you.'

Then we finish with a prayer or a song. You could say the Lord's prayer. With older children, you could use the collect for Ash Wednesday (<https://tinyurl.com/38wc9kcr>). With my young children, we sing 'It's me, O Lord' (<https://hymnary.org/media/fetch/96001>).

A Lent Table

You could create a Lent Table together - a display of objects to stay in place for all of Lent, and to remind you of the season. It could be on a windowsill or shelf rather than a tabletop. For our Lent Table we usually have a purple cloth (purple is the colour for Lent), a candle, an empty bowl, a Bible, a cross, ash leftover from Ash Wednesday, and some sand. You might like to include a vase of purple flowers - there are plenty of irises and crocuses about at the moment, and grape hyacinths will appear soon!



Praying



Lent is a lovely opportunity to establish a new routine of praying together, or to re-find an old routine that has fallen by the wayside (as ours often do!) It could be: saying a short prayer with your child on waking up or leaving the house in the morning; saying grace together before a meal; or praying together before bed.

For younger children, prayer cards can work well. We have a book of children's prayers, from which I picked about 12 that I liked and thought might resonate. Then I cut them out (with the pictures) and stuck them on separate bits of card. Each night at bedtime, the children

chose 2 or 3 for us to say together.

The Diddy Disciples website has sung prayers for different moments of the day: <https://www.diddydisciples.org/tcahprayersthroughtheday>. These are aimed at younger children.

The *examen* is a prayer of reviewing the day, and I think it's wonderful for children and young people to do. You can find an *examen* for young people here - <https://soundcloud.com/pray-as-you-go/examen-for-young-people> - and one for children here - <https://soundcloud.com/pray-as-you-go/examen-for-children>. Those are audio versions, but if you prefer you can use them to become familiar with the *examen* so that you can lead your children through the prayer yourself.

Giving

Lent is a time to give away. With children and young people, that could look like: putting something in the food-bank donation basket at your local supermarket each time you go there together; having a sort-out of clothes, toys and books and giving away what you don't use; inviting an older child to make a standing order to a charity from their allowance.



Fasting

Depending on their age, you could talk to your children and young people about whether they would like to make a little more room in their days by stopping doing

something, or by doing less of something. They might answer 'violin practice' rather than 'screen-time', but they might surprise you!



You could think as a family about the environmental impact of your lifestyle - the ways you travel, the things you consume, the energy you use at home - and commit to one or two changes that would reduce damage to the environment.

You might like to choose a time - Friday evening, for example - to have a simpler meal than usual. That time could also be an opportunity to read a story from the Bible together each week (see below).

Reading the Bible

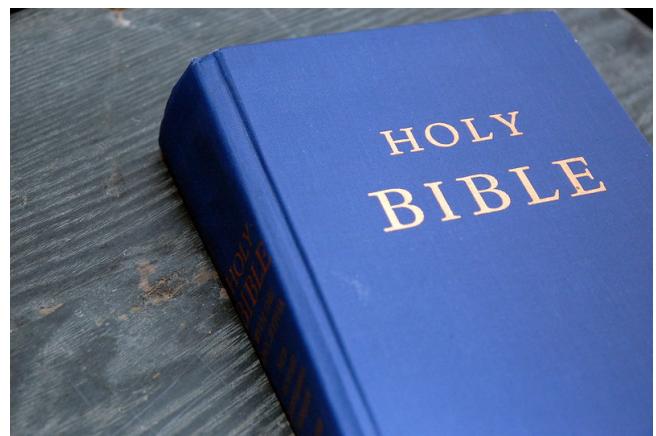
As a family, you could choose one mealtime each week to read a story from the Bible together. If you have made a Lent Table, you could bring over some of the objects from that to the table where you are eating. You could also light a candle. (Some families have six candles - one for each Sunday of Lent; each week, all the candles are lit, then a candle is extinguished for each Sunday that has passed.)

After you have read the story, you might like to spend some time thinking about it together, using questions like these: What part did you notice the most? What part did you like? What part seemed most important? What did the story remind you of or make you think about? How did it make you feel? What questions does it make you ask?

As well as - or instead of - thinking about the story together, your children or young people might like to make something in response to it. They could use lego, air-dry

clay, plasticine, natural materials like sticks and leaves... If you have made a Lent Table, they could add what they make to the Lent Table each week.

Here are two possible sets of stories to use (with more stories than you need in each set):



Stories about Jesus: Jesus blesses the little children (Mark 10), The good neighbour (Luke 10), The lost sheep (Luke 15), Jesus the healer (Luke 5), Zacchaeus turns to Jesus (Luke 19) A woman's love for Jesus (John 12) The pharisee and the tax collector (Luke 18) A farmer went to sow (Matthew 13)

Stories about God's people in the wilderness (best found in children's Bibles, as the narratives are long): Jacob runs away (Genesis 28-33); The burning bush (Exodus 3-4); A long journey (Exodus 13-19); The giving of the commandments (Exodus 19-40); David the outlaw (1 Samuel 21 - 2 Samuel 1); Elijah in the wilderness (1 Kings 19)

You could also (or instead) make a habit of reading a story from the Bible with younger children each evening at bedtime. The Children of God Storybook Bible and The Lion Storyteller Bible are both great.

Finally...

Life with children is full, and Lent is a time for making room, so please don't let these suggestions be an added pressure! Take only what is useful, and no more. I wish you and your families a Lent full of blessings.

Rosie

*Rev'd Rosie Hewitt
Children's and Youth Minister
rosieh@gsm.cam.ac.uk*

