

Witney Way Lent and Easter 2013

Quarantine

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the word “quarantine” was first recorded in 1609, stating a length of 40 days, during which a dowager was allowed to stay in her deceased husband’s house. In 1663 it was being used to describe the period during which persons or ships, should be isolated for fear of contamination. However during 1639, quarantine just meant a period of 40 days. The word comes from the seventeenth century Venetian Italian *quarantena*.

However in the fourteenth century, when the Black Death wiped out an estimated 30% of Europe's population, an original document from 1377, kept in the Archives of Dubrovnik, states that before entering the city, newcomers had to spend 30 days (a *trentine*) in isolation, later on this was extended to 40 days and was called *quarantine*. So it was another 200 or so years before the English used the word.

Moses and the Children of Israel had a sort of quarantine, that of 40 years wandering around the desert of the Sinai peninsula.

We have - whether you knew it or not - just been celebrating the quarantine of the Forty Days of Christmastide, which began on Christmas Day and ended with Compline or Vespers at Candlemas (2nd February). Now like me, you probably couldn’t wait for Twelfth Night and Epiphany (Theophany), so that you could dismantle your decorations, and get back to normal. But we are wrong. Traditionally the celebration of Christmastide lasted forty days. Candlemas is also the Feast of the Purification of The Blessed Virgin Mary, the Presentation of Jesus (Christ) at the Temple, The Meeting of the Lord, and the day when priests used to bless the stock of candles for the coming year.

Now we are about to enter another quarantine, that of Lent (quadragesima); commemorating the forty days which Jesus spent in the desert, being tempted by the devil. It is measured from Ash Wednesday to Easter Day – or Easter Thursday, (Maundy Thursday), according to your own particular persuasion.) ... omitting Sundays, or not, the 40 days is actually anything between 38 and 44 days.

Following Easter, we shall enter another quarantine, that of the 40 days between Christ's Resurrection and his Ascension.

The Eastern Orthodox Church has a quarantine peculiar to itself; Advent is known as The Nativity Fast and lasts for the 40 days leading up to Christmas Day.

So why 40 days? Why not 30 or 50 or 42? According to current learning, the *life-span* during Biblical times was probably the same as it is now. However the *life-expectancy*, for all the obvious reasons of lack of medical understanding and sanitation, was probably around 30; if we exclude infant mortality from the equation, then it is likely to be nearer 40. I'm sure it's all allegorical, just a big number suggesting importance or estimation, or perhaps representing a generation.*

The number 40 appears in The Bible between 50 and 60 times, depending how you count the references.

40 is a big number for measurement:

- (Genesis 18:29) The Lord would spare Sodom if 40 righteous could be found.
- (Genesis 32:15) Jacob goes to make peace with his brother Esau taking amongst other animals 40 kine (cows)
- (Exodus 26:19) The Lord gives Moses instructions on how to build the tabernacle of the temple "... and thou shalt make 40 sockets of silver ..."
- (Deut 25:3) The punishment for disputes; "The judge shall cause him to lie down and be beaten ... 40 stripes he may give him ...)
- (Judges 12:14) Abdon had 40 sons
- (2 Kings 8:9) Hazael meets Elisha with 40 camels' burden of gifts
- (Nehemiah 5:15) Accusing former governors of taking excessive taxes "... of bread and , beside 40 shekels of silver."
- (1 Kings 7:38) Solomon took 13 years to build his house. "Then he built 10 lavers of brass: each bathroom contained 40 baths ..." (laver a dish on a wash stand)
- (1 Kings 6:17) The temple was to be 40 cubits long ..." (man's forearm =half metre) Small temple!
- (Ezekiel 41:2) The Lord shows Ezekiel a man measuring the Temple, "... and he measured the length thereof, 40 cubits..."
- (Ezekiel 46:2) "In the four corners of the court, there were courts joined of 40 cubits ..."
- (Acts 23:13) A band of Jews took an oath not to eat or drink until they had killed Paul, "And they were more than 40 which had made this conspiracy."
- (2 Corin 11:24) Paul says, "Of the Jews, five times received I 40 stripes save one."

40 is a big number for length of time:

- (Genesis 7:4,12,17) The rains and the floods "... were upon the earth 40 days and 40 nights."
- (Genesis 25:20) "Isaac was 40 years old when he took Rebekah to wife."
- (Genesis 26:34) "Esau was 40 years old when he took to wife, Judith ..."
- (Exodus 16:35) "The children of Israel did eat manna 40 years ..."
- (Numbs 13:25) Moses sent many to spy on the land of Canaan, "And they returned from searching the land after 40 days."

(Numbs 14:33)	The Lord says to Moses, “And your children shall wander in the wilderness 40 years ...”
(Numbs 32:13)	The lord, “... made them wander in the wilderness 40 years...”
(Deut 2:7)	“... these 40 years, the Lord has been with thee; thou hast lacked nothing.”
(Deut 8:2)	“.., the Lord led thee, these 40 years in the wilderness, to humble thee and to prove thee, whether thou wouldst keep his commandments or no.”
(Deut 29:5)	“ I have led you 40 years in the wilderness, you clothes are not waxen old upon you, and your shoes are not waxen old upon your feet.”
(Joshua 5:6)	“.., the children of Israel walked 40 years in the wilderness ...”
(Joshua 14:7)	Caleb said to Joshua, “40 years old was I, when Moses ... sent me ... to spy out the land ...”
(Judges 3:11)	“... and the land had rest 40 years.”
(1 Samuel 4:18)	“Eli had judged Israel 40 years
(2 Samuel 2:10)	“Ish-Boshesh was 40 years old when he//////////”
(2 Samuel 5:4)	“David reigned 40 years”
(2 Samuel 15:7)	“After 40 years, Absalom said to the king ...”
(1 Kings 11:42)	“The time Solomon reigned was 40 years.”
(2 Kings 12:1)	“Joash reigned 40 years in Jerusalem.”“
(Psalms 95:10)	“40 years was I grieved with this generation.”
(Ezek 29:11,12,13)	“...nor shall it be inhabited 40 years.” “...and her cities shall be desolate 40 years.” “At the end of 40 years I shall gather the Egyptians ...”
(Amos 2:10)	“I led you 40 years in the wilderness.”
(Amos 5:25)	“Ye offered sacrifices 40years.”
(Luke 4:2)	“Jesus was led by the spirit into the wilderness ... being 40 days tempted by the devil.”
(Acts 4:22)	“... for the man healed was above 40 years old.”
(Acts 7:23,30,36)	“Moses was 40 years old when he visited his brethren.” “When 40 years expired, there appeared an angel.” “... had showed wonders in the wilderness 40 years.”
(Acts 13:18,21)	“... the time of 40 years suffered he their manners.” “God gave them Saul by space of 40 years.”
(Hebrews 3:9,17)	“... when your fathers saw my works 40 years.” “... but with whom was he grieved 40 years?”

Incidentally, “*Quarantine*” is the title of a 1998 historical novel by Jim Grace, set in the Judean desert at the time of Jesus.

May I wish you a Very Fulfilling Quarantine.

*So how come Methusaleh (969 years - 78), Noah (950 years - 77), Adam (930 years - 75) and all the other Old Testament characters, lived so long? It has been suggested that translators mistook the lunar year for the solar year, so you would need to divide the figure by 12.37. Even so these were good ages then. But what of Abraham (175 years)? He was reputedly 100 when it was announced that Sarah, then 90, would have a child. Either he was 100 at the time, or he was 8 years old, and Sarah was 7 years three months – I don’t think so!

Howard Brayton