

Tuesday Reflection 16 February 2021 (Shrove Tuesday)

Today is the last day in Ordinary Time before Lent, and as such is a day of preparation for the Lenten Fast.

For many people, today is known simply as 'Pancake Day', but they do not realise its deeper significance. As Lent is a time of fasting and abstinence, it was necessary to clear the house of any foodstuffs which could not be kept until Easter - especially eggs, which are a central ingredient of pancakes. In French, the day is known as 'Mardi gras' - fat Tuesday - when the fats in the house were to be used up. In many countries, Lent is preceded by a Carnival season, where again the idea is to 'clear the decks' (by having a riotous time) before the rigours of Lent set in.

There is another, perhaps more important, spiritual aspect to the day, which is reflected in the name 'Shrove Tuesday'. 'Shrove' is the old past participle of the verb 'to shrive', which means to receive the sacrament of reconciliation, so someone who has been shriven has confessed their sins and been granted absolution. Thus as part of the preparation for Lent one starts with a spiritual clean sweep - perhaps particularly after the excesses of Carnival!

There is another word derived from 'shrive' and that is the word 'shrift', the period given for confession and absolution, which we know in the phrase 'to give someone short shrift', which originally meant to give someone only a short time to make their confession and receive absolution. In earlier times when convicts were sentenced to death, the sentence was executed as quickly as possible, giving the person sentenced but little time to make their confession. The phrase is found, for example, in Shakespeare: in his *Richard III*, Lord Hastings has been sentenced to death and the Duke of Gloucester wants him executed as soon as possible so that he does not have to wait for his dinner:

GLOUCESTER

Off with his head! Now by Saint Paul I swear,

I will not dine until I see the same.

RATCLIFF

Dispatch, my lord (Hastings), the duke would be at dinner:

Make short shrift; he longs to see your head.

Michael Townson