

I think we all know that self-denial is very important. To refuse to die to the past is to refuse to live. To resist contrition is to resist grace and new life. Sorrow for sin is not the opposite of joy- but rather a part of it.

This is true all year round. But we have Lent for dramatizing it. In Lent we put it on stage. We symbolise it in order to make it real for us. Observance of Lent is a work of art. It is as when a painter puts his subject into symbols- not as a substitute for reality, but to bring us into what is real. The play we put on in Lent is the play about self-denial- about dying in order to rise again, about losing ourselves in order to find ourselves, about finding holiness in confessing our sins, about finding happiness in being ashamed of ourselves.

Observing Lent is a physical matter. We can no more observe Lent without fasting or some other bodily inconvenience, than we can make a painting without canvas and paint. But the value of these things is in what they symbolise and dramatise. We cannot keep Lent by just thinking about self-denial- we dramatise it by, for example, fasting. But the point of fasting is not to starve ourselves to death- but to symbolise the self-denial that is a part of being alive.

There are pitfalls here- symbols can just as easily lie as they can take the truth. Self-denial can quickly become self-assertion; an actor can ruin a play by showing off on stage. That's what Jesus

If we are to die to ourselves it is because we are to live for others. The other side of fasting is almsgiving, helping those in need. Again, this is a symbolic act- our almsgiving will not solve the problem of world poverty, nor do we think it will. But it reminds us of the reality of poverty and oppression and need, and our responsibility in the face of it. In our small practices of self-denial and giving to others we make a special drama of our own lives, a drama of death and resurrection.

Tonight we begin this season of Lent with the symbol of ash. Ashes may be signs of good times and happiness; ashes may be signs of terror and unspeakable sorrow. There are the ashes in the urn after cremation.

In 1930, the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, a soldier in the First World War, made this strangely prophetic remark to his journal:

*Out of the previous culture there will be heap of rubble and finally a heap of ashes; yet, over the ashes, spirits will hover.*

Wittgenstein had doubts about the way European civilization was going, but he could not have foreseen what was to happen. By 1938 he had to become a British subject so that he could visit Vienna without fear of being arrested as a Jew.

Ash Wednesday, *Dies Cinerum*, 'The Day of Ashes', dates at

RECEIVING ASHES ON THE HEAD AS A SIGN OF SORROW FOR SIN WAS A practice in England at least by the tenth century. The Anglo-Saxon homilist Aelfric recommends it, warning us with the terrible example of a man who refused to go to church for the ashes on Ash Wednesday and who a few days later was accidentally killed in a boar hunt. In the New Testament, and often in the Hebrew Bible, we hear of people who repent of their sins putting on sackcloth and sprinkling their heads with ashes.

Originally, no doubt, this use of ashes to signify penance was a matter of private devotion; then part of the official rite for reconciling public sinners; then soon extended to all the faithful, in acknowledgement that we are all sinners.

The symbol of repentance rises out of the symbol with which the advent of the Saviour is acclaimed, the beginning of our re-enactment of the mystery of our passing with Christ from death to resurrection, our liberation from the grip of our old ways into the freedom of new life in Christ's Holy Spirit.

Year after year, as we receive these ashes on our foreheads, we remember that it is out of dust that we have come and that it is to dust that we shall return. It is in the sweat of our face that we eat bread, till we return to the ground out of which we were taken (Genesis 3: 10). And yet, for all our mortality, for all our willingness to sin, for all the sorrow with which we are afflicted, the ashes are always there, the symbol of repentance, humility

the holy souls of those who have gone before us, of the Blessed Virgin and the entire company of heaven interceding for us, waiting to receive us into their fellowship in communion with the Blessed Trinity: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.