

LENT A TIME OF RENEWAL

Today, we begin with Jesus the great season of Lent, a pilgrimage of forty days in the desert en route to Jerusalem. These are holy days, a time of renewal when we take stock, review our lives, convert and confess our sins. This is why the Church calls us to the three works Jesus spoke of in the Gospel: prayer, self-denial and charity. Prayer, self-denial and charity, along with the Sacrament of Reconciliation, are meant by the Lord's grace to bring about rebirth, regeneration and renewal, restoring us to the goodness and holiness of our Baptism.

Now in a moment, as an outward sign of this, we wear ashes. It always seems to me ironic that on the day Jesus tells us in the Gospel to pray, fast and give alms in secret, we adopt the very public sign of ashes. I remember this day last year someone stopping me in the street to say I had dirt on my face! It's OK, if you wish, after Mass to wash the ashes off. But this year, may I encourage you to keep them on the rest of the day? After all, our Muslim friends are always keen to tell us all about Ramadan - so why not us about Lent? Wearing ashes is a simple act of mission and evangelisation: you never know who might ask you what you're doing. It's a perfect opportunity to give witness.

*Now is the favourable time: this is the day of salvation.* Lent may seem early this year: after all, we've only just had Christmas. But in another sense, as a time of joy and spiritual renewal, it can't come early enough. In this Mass, let's ask the Lord for His love that Lent 2018 may bring us much growth in holiness and happiness.