

Parish of Esher
Christ Church, Esher with St George's, West End

SERMON

Ash Wednesday, 6 March 2019
8pm Ash Wednesday Service, Christ Church, Esher
Ven. David Gerrard

In the Name of the Living God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Genesis 18.27 Abraham said, "I am but dust and ashes."

Throughout human history ashes have been the symbols of repentance, grief and mourning. We can read in the Hebrew Scriptures "Tamar put ashes on her head and rent her garments." "Mordecai put on sackcloth and ashes." "Job sat down among the ashes." "So I Daniel turned to the Lord God and pleaded with him in prayer, in fasting, in sackcloth and ashes."

And these Biblical words have been taken up in the liturgy of the church. In the committal at a funeral. "Earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust." And in the liturgy for Ash Wednesday with the imposition of ashes on our foreheads being imposed with such words as, "Remember you are dust and to dust you will return."

Originally Lent was the six weeks before Easter, but in the 7th Century four days were added to remind us of the forty days Jesus fasted in the wilderness, and so Lent begins on Ash Wednesday, so called because of the imposition of ashes as a sign of mourning and of penitence for our sins. It is a cruel irony that the greatest sins of the last century in the Holocaust resulted in the vast human ashes from the crematoria at Auschwitz and other death camps.

So Lent is not really about giving up things, useful though may be, but about penance, penitence, a recognition of our past and present evil.

I just mentioned the Holocaust and the man who was probably the most responsible person, apart from Hitler, for causing the Holocaust was Hitler's

own lawyer Dr Hans Frank who as the Nazi ruler of Poland was responsible for the death of 3,600,000 Jews. The Polish community of Jews was the largest in the world. Frank began by herding them into appallingly overcrowded ghettos in the cities of Poland. About 600,000 of them died there of starvation in the ghettos. Frank took his wife and children and visitors to see the ghettos as an outing, a treat.

Those who survived were often shot. They had to walk onto planks over lakes and huge pits formed when sand and other materials had been dug out of the earth, and they were then shot and fell into the waters or pits. Any who were not killed, drowned.

But even that was not enough for Frank who had promised Hitler he would expunge all the Jews in Poland. The remaining survivors were taken by trains to concentration camps, worked to death, or sent directly to the gas ovens. Frank was not an ignorant beast. He was a graduate with a doctorate in law. He was musical, a great lover of classical music and opera. He loved art, and stole from Polish museums for his home huge quantities of precious art and other precious objects, including the magnificent Leonardo painting, Woman with an Ermine.

At the end of the war Frank was captured and with another dozen leading Nazis put on trial at the Nuremberg Tribunal for two new crimes introduced by international agreement to trial those accused of the crimes, and to attempt to prevent further horrendous crimes being committed by nations and their leaders. Ironically, both new laws were brought into international recognition by two brilliant Polish Jewish lawyers, Hersh Lauterpacht and Rafael Lemkin. The two new crimes are known to us and are called, "Crimes Against Humanity" and "Genocide." Frank and most of his fellow accused were convicted by the eight judges, two each from Russia, the United States of America, England and France. Their penalty was death by hanging.

Frank had a large family with five children. His youngest son Niklas grew up opposed to capital punishment except in the case of his father. Niklas carried around in his wallet a photograph of his father, lying dead after his hanging. He carried it, he said, "So that I will always know that the criminal is dead."

Frank was brought up as a Protestant but his mother was a Catholic, and he was converted to Catholicism in prison. The chaplain who accompanied Frank to the gallows was Sixtus O'Connor. When they opened the door to his cell to escort him to the gallows, Frank was kneeling in prayer. He told the priest that when he was a little boy his mother always used to give me the cross every morning when I was leaving for school. Please also do this for me now", he asked the priest.

His son Niklas wondered whether it was for show or maybe it was an honest thing, the only and last honest thing he did. He probably wanted to go back to being an innocent child again, what he was when his mother made the sign of the cross on his forehead. Perhaps he wanted to be a little boy again who had done none of all those crimes."

No one will ever know. But as we all come to receive the sign of the cross on our foreheads this Ash Wednesday evening to be reminded that we are dust and to dust we shall return so we must turn away from sin, and be faithful to Christ. We also remember that we were signed by the cross with the purity of water at our Baptism as well as by the dirt of these ashes today, and we know that we too will be given again the gift of the innocence of the child that each of us once was, and we pray that this innocence may remain with us and prevent us from sins and cruelties and a lack of faith for the rest of our lives.

So let us use today, and the rest of Lent, as a time of mourning, of penitence, and to remember our mortality. Then perhaps the symbolism of the ashes may live on in us and for us.

And now to the God of forgiveness, we offer our prayers and our repentance. Amen.

Amen.