

I am genuinely intrigued to know how John Marshall managed to turn quite a large basket of Palm Crosses, left by the congregation over the last few weeks, into impeccably smooth ash for tonight's service? I ask partly because my one attempt to do this in the past was hopeless, with bits of raw stalk still visible after all my pounding and grinding!

I suspect the difference is a mix of science and lots of practice. You have to know (at least roughly) how these things work, and then to experiment a bit until, as the saying goes, practice makes perfect.

This isn't a bad metaphor for what we are beginning tonight: the keeping of a Good Lent. For Joel's wonderful clarion cry in the 1st reading invites us to *Return*, to return to the Lord in a penitential frame of mind. And of course we have done it all before, lots of times. We have heard, year on year, how this period of Lent *helps us to grow in faith and devotion*. But does it?

Perhaps the answer lies in our willingness to attempt these changes of heart – as if for the first time. We all know that we are much more enthusiastic about things when they still have novelty value. It is said we pay more attention to our first child and that probably is true for many of the things we do.

But isn't that missing the point? For mature Christians who value the cyclical nature of the Christian year, the challenge is, can we overcome our lethargy and the sheer familiarity with the sins we find most difficult to overcome? We may have tried to give them up but - like not eating chocolate for Lent – we have found it all too difficult and have just given up.

Yet that is precisely what Joel is calling us back to – and more pictorially, John Marshall's pot of ash. Quietly, without fuss, we are being invited to return to those areas of life which are most intractable, and to go on practicing the disciplines which will, not quite yet perhaps, but eventually, reduce our hard hearts of stone to the soft, yielding hearts which God first gave us. *Let us return...* over and over and over again, secretly, patiently - and with confidence that, by God's grace, we'll succeed.

