

**LENT 2013**

NOW, NOW, IT IS THE LORD WHO SPEAKS, COME BACK TO ME WITH ALL YOUR HEART. Today, Ash Wednesday, the Church begins the great season of Lent in preparation for Easter. Lent, from the Anglo-Saxon lencten, 'when the days lengthen,' that is, Springtime, is meant to be a time of spiritual rebirth and renewal, a time for raking the soil and planting, a time for cleansing and putting things in order. In Lent, the whole Church is on pilgrimage with Christ in the desert, journeying to Jerusalem for the Passover, for Christ's Passing-Over from death to life. This is why the Church asks us during this season to listen extensively to the Word of God, to celebrate the Sacraments, especially to go to Confession, and to undertake the three great penitential works of prayer, fasting and charity. In Lent, we recall our mortality, that we are totally dependent at every moment on God's providence, that we ARE DUST AND UNTO DUST we SHALL RETURN. The Liturgy today captures this dramatically by using ashes, an ancient Jewish sign of repentance, and by asking us to keep this day as a day of Fasting and Abstinence.

But for us Catholics, Lent 2013 will be particularly dramatic, in light of the news this week that the holy father Pope Benedict is to step down. Personally I'm very sad about this; I feel bereaved, although I do think the Holy Father's decision is humble-courageous. It is many centuries since a Pope stepped down from office and this will be for us a new situation. I am sure I speak for all of us in the Diocese of Portsmouth in expressing our profound gratitude to God for all we've received during the reign of this 264<sup>th</sup> Successor of Peter. This Lent, we should pray for him and for his intentions, whilst also asking the Lord to pour out his Holy Spirit upon the whole Church as we prepare for the Conclave that will elect the next pope. Perhaps we will have a new Pope by Easter? Either way, Lent 2013 will be a special time for us Catholics and an opportunity for every single one of us to witness to our Catholic faith as the eyes of the world and its media look to the events unfolding in Rome. Each one of us needs to be mature about our faith, responsible for what we say and do, careful to be loyal to Christ and His Church. This is why we need to take this Lent seriously, offering our works of prayer, fasting and charity for the renewal of the Church.

NOW IS THE FAVOURABLE TIME. THIS IS THE DAY OF SALVATION. Let me end with a thought from Pope Benedict's Message for this Lent. "The Christian life" he says "consists in continuously scaling the mountain to meet God, and then coming back down, bearing the love and strength drawn from him, so as to serve our brothers and sisters." And the greatest work of charity, he adds, is evangelisation, handing on the love of Jesus and his gift of eternal life to others. We cannot give what we haven't got. So this Lent, let's really try to deepen the love of Jesus in our own lives so we can give that love to others. Let's try to get to Mass as often as we can, to celebrate the Sacrament of Reconciliation, and to undertake those Lenten works of penance: prayer, fasting and charity. Indeed, in this Mass, as we scale the mountain to meet Jesus whose Heart is a burning furnace of charity, let us pray for the energy to go from here to share that love with others.