

POPE BENEDICT XVI

Today, we offer Mass for the intention and well-being of Pope Benedict XVI, thanking God for all we have received through the ministry of this 264th Successor of Peter. We do so on this Second Sunday of our Lenten journey, when the whole Church, accompanied by Mary, the saints and angels, is on pilgrimage in the desert with Christ, en route to Jerusalem to celebrate his Death and Resurrection. Today the Liturgy takes us up a high mountain. As with any great height, it's enough first to pause, to take in the view: Where am I? Where am I going? Where is my life up to? In the Bible, mountains are holy, nature's altars, places of splendour where we can encounter God. Today on Tabor, Jesus was transfigured, HIS CLOTHING BRILLIANT AS LIGHTNING. He revealed not only his glory as God the Son but also his future, risen humanity, what you and I are one day called to be. In him we see our hope and destiny. It's a glimpse of heaven. Jesus did this, St. Leo says, to strengthen the apostles' faith in the light of what was about to happen. No wonder St. Peter exclaimed: LORD, IT'S WONDERFUL FOR US TO BE HERE!

This Lent, the eyes of the world and its media will be on the Catholic Church and its 1.2B members. On Wednesday the holy father will make his last public appearance and soon, the cardinals will gather for the new conclave. Personally, I felt safe under Pope Benedict and although I applaud his humble, courageous decision to step down, I am sad. In human terms we knew the Church under him was in good hands, as under Peter himself, whom Jesus made the Rock. Benedict has been very different from Bl. John Paul. He was full of creativity and energy, reaching out on the world stage, whereas Benedict, shy and retiring, a scholar and man of prayer, has been a modern father of the Church, like St. Augustine his patron. His contribution as a theologian and then as pope, has been enormous. I remember when on the staff of Oscott, I suddenly noticed how I now had two shelves full of Ratzinger's books. If John Paul looked to the Eastern bloc, Benedict has been concerned with the West: how to renew the Church in Europe and how to tackle the crisis of European civilisation, now adrift on a sea of relativism. But there's one thing in particular I'm grateful to him for. Let me explain.

Christians are in the world, but not of it. We belong to contemporary culture, but more importantly, we also belong to Christ as a member of his Body, the Church. This double identity sets up a tension between the culture of faith and the world we live in, a tension that goes on in-here, within the heart of each one of us. Pope Benedict has sought to remind us of this critical conversation between faith and culture, to explore it, and to remind us we belong to Jesus Christ first. Indeed this is our Catholic distinctiveness. It makes us sentinels on the look-out. We love the exciting new world opening up before us in this 21C, with advances in every field of human endeavour, but we are also aware of the dangers and we have a prophetic role to point them out, however unwelcome. I pray the new pope will inspire the Church in Britain to continue its humanitarian mission, witnessing to authentic humanism.

LORD, IT'S WONDERFUL FOR US TO BE HERE! On this Second Sunday of Lent then, let us pray for the grace to be what we are meant to be, so that when asked, we can give a good account. In this Mass, as we meet the Lord Jesus, whose Heart is the source of all consolation, let's ask him to bless the Church with the right man for the challenges ahead.