

Homily to be preached by the Most Revd George Stack, Archbishop of Cardiff, at a Mass in Thanksgiving for the Ministry of Pope Benedict XVI at St. David's Cathedral, Cardiff, 7.00 pm, 27 February 2013

When the apostle Paul was leaving the small Christian community at Ephesus, his final message were those words we have just heard in the scriptures:

“So stand your ground, with truth a belt around your waist, and uprightness a breastplate, wearing for shoes on your feet the eagerness to spread the gospel of peace, and always carrying the shield of faith...” (Ephesians 6:10)

These words could easily be in the mind of Pope Benedict XVI tomorrow night as he lays down the mantle of the Petrine office. He might even add more words Paul spoke on that occasion: “...and pray for me to be given an opportunity to open my mouth and fearlessly make known the mystery of the gospel”. (Ephesians 6:19).

Isn't this what Pope Benedict has done in the last eight years of his papacy? Done it as a theologian, in his writings, in his preaching and in his teaching over so many years? But it was when he came to the United Kingdom to beatify John Henry Newman in 2010 that we saw into his mind and heart as he spoke about this wonderful English theologian for whom he has such a regard. Benedict spoke about the “loving wisdom” which is at the heart of our faith. He spoke about “the wisest love” of God in his encyclical “Deus Caritas Est” (God is Love). In that encyclical he reminds us that “Being a Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or lofty idea, but an encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction”.

Sometimes, it takes a whole lifetime to learn that we are loved and loveable. Some of us never learn the lesson – the reason for so much pain and hurt in human relationships. If we find it difficult to accept that we are capable of being loved, how much more difficult will it be to develop the capacity to offer selfless love to another person, to our families and to the wider community. If that is true on a human level, how much more true it is when we try to understand and accept that God's love for me is an unconditional, self sacrificing, forgiving love.

O generous love! That he who smote
In man for man the foe,
The double agony in man
For man should undergo.

No wonder Jesus asks Peter three times “Do you love me?”. So often the words trip off our lips without realizing the implications of what we say. “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you”. By asking again, by repeating the words, by thinking about the meaning, we have to reflect on the cost of love. “Lord, you know everything. You know that I love you”. For Peter, the price was to be martyrdom. Taken in captivity to Rome. Imprisoned. Crucified upside down. “When you were young you put on your own belt and walked where you liked. When you grow old, you will stretch out your hands and somebody else will put a belt around you and take you where you would rather not go”.(John 21:18)

We all know that Joseph Ratzinger was looking forward to retiring at the death of Pope John Paul II. He was planning to retreat in order to study and complete the writing of his books. But from the balcony of St. Peter’s these last eight years he has had to stretch out his hands and be led to the farthest corners of the globe in order to fulfill the office placed on his shoulders with the Pallium on 24 April 2005.

Speaking of Sunday’s gospel of the Transfiguration of Jesus on the mountain top, Benedict said “At this time of my life...the Lord is calling me to “climb the mountain” and to devote myself to meditation, reflection and prayer. During this Mass we pray with him and for him. Surely the words of our final hymn by John Henry Newman will shape the time that lies ahead:

Simply to his grace and holy
Light and life and strength belong.
And I love supremely, solely,
Him the holy, him the strong.