

## The Gift of Lent

What an historic week this has been for the Catholic Church. No-one could have predicted the news that came out of the Vatican last Monday, and we remain somewhat stunned by the unexpected and seemingly sudden resignation of Pope Benedict. How it will affect the Church, and what the implications will be, remain to be seen. But I think we ought to acknowledge that Pope Benedict's decision should be looked on as a courageous one, made not for himself but for the benefit of the Church. As we enter into Lent, perhaps we could use this moment to reflect on the gift of grace which we will receive through our prayer, fasting and alms-giving, and apply it to our own understanding of our courage and our desire to serve.

On Ash Wednesday we received the ashes of Lent, and we were reminded by them of our own mortality; none of us goes on for ever. Having the courage to make important decisions about our lives requires much thought and contemplation. It matters not whether we are young or old, because times change and situations change. It is the act of discerning the correct choice which presents us with the biggest challenge. Here can be a moment of real testing, and in the Gospel today, Jesus is confronted with just such a moment. Are our moments of testing bolstered by our willingness to turn to God for support and strength? Are we courageous enough to open ourselves up in prayer to God when we need help and advice? Responding to the many challenges of life by allowing God to walk with us provides us with much comfort, consolation and strength.

It is in the call to be servants to each other that the mark of Christian charity becomes an inviolable one. Jesus' call to *conversion*, to a *turning of the heart*, is made at the very outset of his ministry. In other words, this conversion must be the first act of the disciple of Christ. Thereafter, all other tasks and deeds are coloured by this turning of our hearts towards God. *Did not our hearts burn within us?* These are the words of the disciples on the road to Emmaus, who after receiving the sacrificial life-giving presence of the Risen Lord, quite literally *turn around* and go back to Jerusalem filled with the desire to be servants of the Good News. In all of our relationships, recognising and working for the good of the other, puts Christ the servant at the centre.

The pattern of our Lent is framed through that threefold cohort of prayer, fasting and good works. Yet divorced from courage and service, this trinity of tasks can become colourless and routine. The courage to pray for the needs of the world, as well as applying to those needs our own physical endeavour, recognises that *Man does not live on bread alone*. The courage to honour the call to *worship the Lord our God*, and to *not put the Lord our God to the test* express a steadfast acknowledgement that such courage manifests our faith in the God who loves us, and who is present amongst us in the person of Jesus. Furthermore, the call to be servants enfolds our prayer, our fasting and our charity in the mantle of love which Christ manifested to us through his example.

As Pope, Benedict has over these last eight years been our pastor and our teacher. His preaching and his writing have been the hallmark of his papacy. His momentous decision to relinquish the papacy now, evoke in one last act, a final pasturing and teaching gesture of great sacrifice delivered with much courage and desire to serve the Church. Well done good and faithful servant! Let us pray for him, for each other and for the Church during this Lent.