



**Feast of the Epiphany  
Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI Remembrance Mass**

**Homily**

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**Sunday 08 January 2023  
St Mary's Cathedral, Perth**

When Pope Benedict XVI announced his resignation from the papacy in 2013 most people were caught by surprise. The last pope to voluntarily resign was Pope Celestine V who resigned his office in the year 1294, five months after his election. He was subsequently imprisoned by his successor, Pope Boniface VIII, and died just 18 months later. Apparently, Pope Boniface feared that Celestine might become the centre of a conspiracy to undermine Boniface's legitimacy as pope.

Boniface need not have worried. Pope Celestine was a simple and humble man who was a threat to nobody and was, indeed, a man of great holiness. He simply recognised that he did not have the gifts needed to guide the Church at that time. His goodness and holiness were confirmed when he was canonised in the year 1313 by Pope Clement V who succeeded Pope Boniface.

If Pope Benedict's resignation was a surprise, and even a shock, to many, the same could not be said of his death just last week. Pope Francis had alerted us just a few days earlier that Benedict was seriously ill and that he needed the support of our prayers. Our Mass this morning is part of our response to the call of Pope Francis to pray for his predecessor. It is an expression of our Catholic faith that, as the Book of Wisdom reminds us, "it is a holy and wholesome thought to pray for the dead that they may be loosed from their sins."

As a man of profound faith and deep humility, Pope Benedict would be horrified to think that anyone presumed that because he was the pope he is not in need our prayers. Benedict was deeply steeped in the scriptures and would have been very conscious of the fear expressed by Saint Paul in his First Letter to the Corinthians, that having preached the gospel to others he might still be lost himself if he did not remain faithful (cf 1 Cor 9:27). Today, then, in this celebration of the Eucharist, we pray for Pope Benedict that in the Lord's great love and mercy he might be welcomed with joy into the fulness of life. And in this Cathedral, dedicated as it is to Mary, the Mother of the Lord and Mother of the Church, we recall how often Pope Benedict must have had on his lips the words of the Hail Mary: Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners now, and at the hour of our death. We should not doubt for a moment that Mary has listened to these prayers



and that she has accompanied Pope Benedict on his journey through the gates of death to the wonder of eternal life.

As we reflect on this journey of Pope Benedict, which is one we all will make, hopefully at the time of God's own choosing, we might recall some words from the Scriptures which have been a part of our liturgy in these days following the celebration of Christmas. They are words which come from the First Letter of Saint John: Think of the love that the Father has lavished on us by letting us be called God's children, and that is what we are .... My dear people, we are already the children of God but what we are to be in the future has not yet been revealed. All we know is that, when it is revealed, we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he really is (1 John 3:1-2).

These words, so rich in meaning and overflowing with a joy-filled hope, are part of the inspired Word of God and can guide us as we wonder what eternal life will be like. What can it possibly mean for us to "be like God" and to "see God as God really is"? Pope Benedict XVI, one of the greatest theologians in this or any age in our Christian history put it this way: "God", he wrote, "is so great that we can never finish our searching. God is always new. With God there is perpetual, unending encounter, with new discoveries and new joy". We often pray that those who have died may "rest in peace", and rightly so. But as Christians we believe that the peace of eternal life is not a passive thing but rather a living, active, enriching and dynamic journey into the unending mystery and beauty of God. But Pope Benedict was not simply a great theologian; he was also a deeply human, sensitive man. And so, he went on to add this to the words I have just quoted: "At the same time, in an entirely human perspective, I look forward to being reunited with my parents, my siblings, my friends, and I imagine it will be as lovely as it was at our family home". Benedict's hope, and his faith, were not simply theories or intellectual challenges; they were a profound expression of his deep humanity.

When in the first letter of Saint John we read that "we will be like God because we shall see God as he really is", the very next line is this: "Surely all those who entertain this hope must purify themselves, must try to be as pure as Christ" (1 John 3:3). Pope Benedict understood this deeply. How often did he insist that, in spite of what so many, both outside the Church and sadly sometimes within the Church, seem to believe, the essence of Christianity, and of our Catholic faith, is not to be found in rules and regulations, important though these may be, but in a living relationship with Christ which transforms us and makes us more deeply human. Indeed, it is the genuineness and strength of our relationship with Christ, which Pope Benedict calls a relationship with Life itself and Love itself, that will help us make sense of the rules and regulations and see them not as limitations on our freedom but as safeguards for our freedom.

To live in this relationship with Christ and to try to be as pure as Christ – to have, as Saint Paul expresses it in another of his letters, the same mind that was in Christ Jesus – this is the essence of our Christian life and the pathway to that fulness of joy into which we pray Pope Benedict has entered. In recent years the Church has been richly blessed by God in the men he has given to us to lead the Church. In the last forty-five years the See of Peter has been held by Pope Saint



John Paul II, by Pope Benedict XVI, and now by Pope Francis. Each of these men has been unique. Each has had his own gifts, his own personality and, like all of us, his own limitations. But each has, in very special ways, revealed something of the great mystery of Christ. In doing so each pope has also helped us to understand a little better what it means to have in us the same mind as was in Christ Jesus.

When Pope Benedict resigned many people were surprised and some were dismayed. They looked back to Saint John Paul II and saw in his patient endurance of his suffering, especially in the last years of his life, a powerful symbol of Jesus, the Suffering Servant who in his acceptance of his sufferings gave meaning and hope to the very experience of suffering itself. Why, then, did Pope Benedict not do the same as he experienced his own strength beginning to wane? As we look back now on the last ten years and Pope Benedict's slow decline, we can see that he was called to give witness to a different but equally essential aspect of the mystery of Christ. Just as Jesus did not cling on to his dignity as the Son of God but emptied himself in humility in order to allow the Kingdom of God to grow, so Benedict, with the same humility, let go of the privileges and influence of the papacy in order to allow something new to emerge in the life of the Church, according to God's plan. He knew that he would be criticised, and even branded a deserter, but like Saint John the Baptist he also knew that his role was to grow smaller in the life of God's people so that the Lord could appear more clearly as the centre of the Church's life and mission. Through his humility, modelled on the Lord who described himself as "meek and humble of heart", it became possible for the Lord to give the Church a new and unexpected gift, the gift of Pope Francis who keeps reminding us that the Church, in all we do and say, must reflect the face of Christ who is, Pope Francis insists, the face of the Father's mercy.

Sometimes people are inclined to play one pope off against another: to say that "I am a John Paul II Catholic" or "I am a Benedict Catholic" or "I am a Francis Catholic". To do this, though, is to miss the precious opportunity God is offering us to allow ourselves to be drawn more deeply into what it means to "try to be as pure as Christ" and to have in us "the same mind that was in Christ Jesus". God is calling us to embrace the great mystery of human suffering which Pope John Paul II understood so well; God is calling us to embrace that humility and gentleness which lay at the heart of Pope Benedict's courageous decision to retire; and God is calling us to embrace the urgent need for the Church today to be more clearly than ever before a reflection of Christ, the face of the Father's mercy. These are not contradictory but complementary dimensions of our Christian vocation.

As we pray, confidently and sincerely, for Pope Benedict as he enters into the great mystery of eternal life, and as we thank God for the gift which he has been for the whole Church, let us commit ourselves to trying our best, like Pope Benedict, Pope Francis and Pope Saint John Paul II, and so many other faithful disciples, to be as pure as Christ, and to be effective witnesses to his love and mercy in our world.