

Sede Vacante – the ‘Seat’ is vacant – the Chair of Peter, Bishop of Rome, is empty.

We are like sheep without a shepherd; the boat

of the Church is without a helmsman; scandals and crises are swirling around the Church at its highest levels.

What are we to do? Indeed, what can we do?

Well: “Despite all these things, overwhelming victory is ours through Christ, who loved us.” Rm. 8: 37

And, I can say that with absolute conviction, because Jesus is, ultimately, the Rock upon which the Church is built; and: “All the powers of hell will not conquer it.” Mt. 16: 18

This is the faith Peter professed at Caesarea Philippi, and those who walk in the shoes of the fisherman as Bishop of Rome also profess.

But anyone in the Church – whoever they are – make a grave mistake if they rely on their own strength to follow Jesus.

For, we’re all warned by Paul in the second reading, that: “If you think you are strong, be careful not to fall. The temptations in your life are no different from what others experience.” 1 Cor. 10: 12 – 13

At the end of John’s Gospel, Jesus asks Peter three times if he loves Him, to wipe clean Peter’s three-fold denial of his Lord.

Then, the Lord says to Peter: “When you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and to go wherever you wished. But when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go.” Jn. 21: 18

Did this not happen to Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger when he was elected Pope in April 2005?

Now he has stood down and, as Pope-emeritus, Benedict has been led by the Lord to lay down his life for us again; to lay down his life in prayer for the Church.

But, what can I, in this small corner of the Universal Church, do?

I have no power or influence at all; but yes, I have!

Like Benedict, we can pray for the Church; because prayer can take us into places, and situations, which we couldn’t possibly be in physically, but can be spiritually.

And, when we embark upon prayer, we must, Paul tells us:

“Be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power. Put on the whole armour of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.” Eph. 6: 10 – 12

We’re all called to holiness: to be, Jesus tells us: “Perfect, even as your Father in heaven is perfect.” Mt. 5: 48

Well, I might as well give up now; I’m nowhere near being good, let alone perfect: so what am I do?

To do what God told Moses to do at the burning bush: “Take off your shoes, for you are standing on holy ground.” Ex. 3: 5

To, metaphorically, take off our shoes so that we can do what Paul says in Ephesians: “As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace.” Eph. 6: 15

Then, fully equipped as true disciples – imitators – of Jesus, He can mould us into His image, and we can walk with His Gospel into the world.

Yet, sadly, so often, we want to walk in our own shoes, not those the Lord’s prepared for us.

In Turl Street in Oxford there’s a small, insignificant shoe shop called Duckers, which has been there for years.

It’s no ordinary shoe shop as it custom-makes shoes for people; each one crafted exactly to fit that unique pair of feet.

I've never been able to afford to have a pair of shoes made there; but what's wonderful about Jesus is that the spiritual shoes He makes for us are custom-made.

Through the Cross, He has made them for us at great cost to Himself, but anyone can own them; yet you don't have to be wealthy, famous or extra special in any way.

You don't have to be good in the first-place, because Jesus wants us to be saved by His grace alone.

All that Jesus asks of us is that we repent, which isn't quite the same as 'doing penance.

'Doing penance,' giving up something we like for Lent – chocolate, alcohol, whatever – can lead to repentance; or it can simply become a physical 'detox.'

The root of the word, repentance is in the Greek word, *metanoia*.

It means having a transformative change of heart; a spiritual heart-transplant.

What's involved in *metanoia* – repentance – is to stand up, and completely turn around our life to seek the face of Jesus.

And, in doing so, we will encounter the Lord Jesus, and He will personally invite us to change as persons.

He calls us, each and every one of us, by name: "I have redeemed you; [He says] I have called you by name: you are mine." [Is. 43:1](#)

To stand on holy ground: through Him, and with Him, and in Him.

Although we don't encounter a burning bush whenever we come here for the Eucharist, we're truly standing on holy ground.

We're standing in the Real Presence of the Lord God; He who dwells amongst us in the humility of bread and wine.

The fig-tree in the Gospel represents God's People who, having had Jesus, their Saviour, dwelling amongst them, had produced no fruits of repentance – except for a: "Remnant, saved by grace."

[Rm. 11: 5](#)

And, because of that grace, we have hope: but not a vague, sepia-toned sort of hope.

We're saved in hope; the hope that: "Does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us; for while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for us." [Rm. 5: 5 – 6](#)

I think a sermon should give us faith, hope, and assurance.

I can do no better in trying to achieve that than by leaving you with the words Pope-emeritus Benedict spoke to us at his final Wednesday Audience at St Peter's.

"I would like to invite everyone to renew their trust in the Lord, to entrust ourselves like children to God's arms, certain that those arms hold us up and are what allow us to walk forward each day, even when it is a struggle. [and] In this you can touch what the Church is – not an organisation, not an association for religious or humanitarian ends, but a living body, a communion of brothers and sisters in the Body of Jesus Christ who unites