

Book review: Walking with Pope Benedict XVI on my Lenten journey

When Pope Benedict XVI announced his resignation just days before Ash Wednesday, I decided to read one of his books, *Jesus of Nazareth: Holy Week: From the Entrance into Jerusalem to the Resurrection*. It seemed like an appropriate choice for Lent, but it ended up being more than that. As I read it each evening during Lent, it became a sort of partner on my Lenten journey.

What is apparent from the first pages is that the author is a brilliant theologian with a deep, deep love for the subject and an even deeper faith. That was no surprise, of course. And I am sure I did not take away from the book everything I could if I had a sharper mind.

✖ I will say, however, that I found the writing of our pope emeritus to be readable and accessible. Of course, as you read, you have this sense that there is so much more knowledge and insight behind the words on the page—sort of like looking at the ocean through a telescope from miles away and imagining the power of the waves if you were to experience them up close.

What I enjoyed most about the book was how Pope Benedict asks us to look so closely at details in the Holy Week stories that I had glossed over before. I am someone who loves details, so why have I never craved this depth of close reading of the Bible before? I found him challenging me in a good way.

As he writes, Pope Benedict delves into Gospel passages and compares the different descriptions the writers offer. And you find yourself caught up in discussions about the Temple or whether the Last Supper was a Passover meal. As I read, delving into history and Biblical passages and looking through the author's theological lens, I felt much more closely connected to the events we celebrate during Holy Week. And when I heard the Gospel on Palm Sunday, it seemed just a little closer, more vivid and real.

I thought I would share with you five passages from the book to give you a taste of the beautiful writing. There is so, so much more where these came from, but these were some of the many places I marked as I read so I could go back and reread.

"Let us return to Jesus' prayer that, through the unity of the disciples, the world may recognize him as the one sent by the Father. This recognizing and believing is not something merely intellectual; it is about being touched by God's love and therefore changed; it is about the gift of true life."

"Because infinite good is now at hand in the man Jesus, the counterweight to all wickedness is present and active within world history, and the good is always

infinitely greater than the vast mass of evil, however terrible it may be.”

“It is part of the mystery of God that he acts so gently, that he only gradually builds up his history within the great history of mankind; that he becomes man and so can be overlooked by his contemporaries and by the decisive forces within history; that he suffers and dies and that, having risen again, he chooses to come to mankind only through the faith of the disciples to whom he reveals himself; that he continues to knock gently at the doors of our hearts and slowly opens our eyes if we open our doors to him.”

“The Lord is ‘on the mountain’ of the Father. Therefore he sees us. Therefore he can get into the boat of our life at any moment. Therefore we can always call on him’ we can always be certain that he sees and hears us. In our own day, too, the boat of the Church travels against the headwind of history through the turbulent ocean of time. Often it looks as if it is bound to sink. But the Lord is there, and he comes at the right moment. ‘I go away, and I will come to you’—that is the essence of Christian trust, the reason for our joy.”

“To be a Christian is primarily a gift, which then unfolds in the dynamic of living and acting in and around the gift.”

To be a Christian is a gift. Imagine that. As we watch our new pope in action, as we reflect on the humility of Pope Benedict, who stepped aside when he knew someone else was called to fill that role, as we rejoice in the blessings of Easter, we are truly unwrapping some unexpected gifts—but without losing sight of that most magnificent gift of being a follower of Christ.

If you have read Jesus of Nazareth: Holy Week: From the Entrance into Jerusalem to the Resurrection, I’d love to hear your thoughts here or at openwindowcr@gmail.com. How did reading it shape your faith journey or give you new insight?