

Visit of Pope Benedict XVI



Both by birth and by calculated choice, I am not a Roman Catholic. I find that on most of the major issues of the day I have differences of opinion with the line of the Roman Catholic Church, such as on the issues of the ordination of women, homosexuality, authority of the conscience as opposed to the Church, contraception, etc.

However, the visit was interesting to observe. I read the newspaper reports and although I didn't see much, I did watch 45 minutes of the televised Evening Prayer at Westminster Abbey and couldn't help feeling moved. The gaps between the Church of England and the Roman Catholic Church are perhaps nowhere more visible than in the differences visible between Rowan Williams and Joseph Ratzinger. The pope is now aged 83, the Archbishop of Canterbury is 60 years old. Both are scholars, but their views on most issues diverge dramatically. Rowan Williams is an arch-liberal, Joseph Ratzinger an arch conservative. There is no meeting of minds between these two men and these different views of the world, and as Christians we should accept that, remain good friends, and not worry too much at the present about organic union. Friendship is enough for the time being. For there to be more union, the Roman Catholic Church would have to liberalise itself dramatically, which seems today highly unlikely. Perhaps not in the future? We need a Pope who is willing to modernise to reflect contemporary truths about human life and relationships. One will come, in due course.

I was struck by a quotation from the Pope's speech made on 16th September, 2010 in Holyroodhouse Palace in Edinburgh, in the presence of the Queen and many other dignitaries. What made this speech astonishing for me was that here was a German man, who at the age of 14 joined the Hitler Youth movement, speaking about the dangers of atheistic philosophies, quoting Nazism as an example, and telling the Brits to be more aware of their Christian foundations. Quite extraordinary!

"Today, the United Kingdom strives to be a modern and multicultural society. In this challenging enterprise, may it always maintain its respect for those traditional values and cultural expressions that more aggressive forms of secularism no longer value or even tolerate.

"Let it not obscure the Christian foundation that underpins its freedoms; and may that patrimony, which has always served the nation well, constantly inform the example your government and people set before the two billion members of the Commonwealth and the great family of English-speaking nations throughout the world."

However odd it may seem, the words are a valuable contribution to our own debate about Christianity, and how it has both shaped the best things in our country, as well as the way it has disfigured it through bigotry and violence. It is an inheritance that needs picking through more carefully with those who are keen to point out the negative whilst being totally blind to the real and cherished positives.

Neil Richardson