



HOMILY by Father Robbie Low

5th Sunday of Easter Year C

God has opened a door to the Gentiles

Readings: Acts 14: 21-27, Ps 145, Revelation 21: 1-5a, John 13: 31-33a, 34, 35

Those of you with very long memories – and are old enough to have them – may recall an Olympic Games of long ago, Rome 1960 to be exact, when the sole British gold medal hero of track and field was a man called Don Thompson. Thompson, a tiny, skinny man in dark glasses, a funny hat and neck shade, stormed to victory, with his bizarre cartoonish gait, in the 50km walk.

He had practised for the blistering Italian summer by training in his track suit in steaming bathrooms to the accompaniment of boiling kettles. Of such far sightedness and strategic planning are the most unlikely victories composed.

Thompson, or Il Topolino (the Mighty Mouse), as the Italians dubbed him, came into my mind this week for several reasons but mainly because I had been thinking too much about walking. My family will tell you that I regard 'WALK' as a four letter word.

However...walking is in the air.

Several people have asked if the weekly parish walks are going to be revived. Deacon Brian is walking the coastal path for the Catholic Childrens' Society. Next weekend a group of youngsters (and a few decrepits like me) will be doing the 30 mile Saints' Way Rosary Walk to help take handicapped children to Lourdes. In the autumn Walk Cornwall, involving all the Christian communities, will take to the streets of our county to preach the Gospel. Everyone, it seems is either walking or supporting walkers carrying the Gospel.

Walking is a great place for fellowship, building friendship, the companionship of physical endeavour and having the time for those conversations that often get missed in daily life.

Today, though we probably didn't notice it in the list of ancient towns that comprised the first reading, we are reminded of the first great walker for the Gospel – St. Paul.

Today's passage takes us to the end of his first missionary journey – a long sea voyage followed by a 300 mile round walk through the Taurus mountains and the towns of the Anatolian heartland.

The significance of these two chapters (13 & 14), which we have been hearing this week at Mass, is that they record the very moment when the Gospel of Christ bursts through the borders of its Jewish origins and begins to fulfil the original promise to Abraham of an opportunity for the redemption of all. This ancient walk through the Taurus mountains is the

moment when the Gentiles, the outsiders, you and me, are finally included and the fellowship of the followers of Jesus becomes the Universal or Catholic Church of Christ.

One small step for man.....one giant leap for mankind. This is our history. At every stage of this mission Paul and Barnabas are greeted equally by enthusiastic conversions and bitter and violent rejection. Each city, each town, forms its own community of faith under the guidance of the Apostle and he ordains its eldership or priests to serve it, as this passage attests. Each community, like its missionaries, will undergo persecution from those viciously opposed to the will of God. It is no different today. One thing we might notice in this little list of communities Paul and Barnabas have missioned, is the town of Lystra.

As our first reading opens Paul has just left Lystra for the town of Derbe where his mission goes well. What we need to remember is that Lystra was the town that gave the missionaries both the most extravagant and enthusiastic welcome and the most violent rejection. It was Palm Sunday and Good Friday rolled into one.

Paul healed a cripple there and the townsfolk believed he and Barnabas were gods. Paul had to stop them worshipping him. Shortly thereafter, enemies of the mission managed to persuade the locals that, not only were Paul and Barnabas not gods but, in fact, they were evil. It was in Lystra that Paul was stoned and left for dead outside the city.

What would you do on regaining consciousness? Paul was surrounded by the little band of new believers AND.....
he walked straight back into Lystra.

The following day, having made his point that nothing stops the Gospel and that believers in the Risen Lord do not fear death, Paul heaves his battered body on the mountain road to Derbe.

Notice also that, on the return journey, Paul and Barnabas do not avoid Lystra or any other city where they have been subject to persecution. They go back through them all, strengthening the newly planted church in each place, ordaining priests and committing them to the Lord. When they finally arrive back in Antioch, where they had been commissioned and ordained themselves, they do not say 'It's hell out there. There's a lot of people out to get us. Best to stay at home.'

NO. They report all that had happened and understand, as we now do with the benefit of hindsight, that a miracle has occurred. 'God has opened a door to the Gentiles.'

It is this evidence that, in a year or so will be presented at the first great Council of the Church, the Council of Jerusalem. Together with the evidence of Scripture and the authoritative teaching of Peter it will herald the take off for the Universal Church.

The Year of Faith is turning into the Year of Walks.

Each of us has our own walk with Jesus.

Each of us, like those early disciples on the Emmaus Road walk needs to understand our Scripture better.

Each of us walks the Gospel Road in our own time, in the footsteps of the giants of the Faith and accompanied by the prayers of the Saints and Martyrs.

All of us are called to proclaim the Gospel of Salvation to the world and to support those who will carry the Good News into hostile territory. Our prayers, our faithfulness and our generosity will ensure that walk continues – for some it will be the mission field of the parish. For others it will lead across the mountains and into other worlds.

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