



HOMILY by Father Robbie Low

24th Sunday Year C

There is more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents...

Readings: Exodus 32: 7-11, 13-14; Ps 50; 1 Timothy 1: 12-17, Luke 15: 1-32

Let us imagine, for a moment, that at the end of Mass today, one of our congregation went home, pulled up an easy chair and a cup of coffee and said to himself, 'Well that's it for me. I'm done with all this God stuff. Dawkins is right, it's a bunch of Hebrew fairy tales and I don't need Jesus in my life anymore.' That man would be said to have '*apostasised*'. That is the technical term for rejecting the Faith, deserting the Church, defecting from the community of believers, turning one's back on God. It means, literally, to stand aside from, to separate oneself.

The upshot would, at a human level, be one of sorrow and regret in the community that a friend and fellow pilgrim had lapsed and rejected God. Socially, however, there would be no consequence. His family would not reject him. His wife would not leave him. His employer would not sack him. His landlord would not evict him. The State would not punish him. The community of Faith that he had rejected would continue to pray for him and long for his return.

In the Islamic community things are somewhat different. Both in the Koran and the Hadith (sayings of Mohammed) there are frequent references to the punishment for apostasy. In many Islamic countries today that remains the

death penalty. Apostasy in Islam does not just encompass a rejection of God but, in practice, a rejection of Mohammed's version of God. So conversion to Christianity is also subject to the highest punishment.

In today's Old Testament reading we encounter the liberated Hebrews, left on their own for a few days while Moses goes into the mountain of God, rejecting God and making a golden calf – returning to paganism. We are witnessing a national apostasy.

On Moses' return he has two tasks.

One is to overturn the rebellion. More important is to intercede with God to ensure that the people are not judged, condemned and destroyed.

There is fervent prayer and there is bloodshed.

In 21st Century post enlightenment, post-Christian West, we would look with horror on both the brutal response of Islamic codes and the summary justice of Mosaic leadership. But before we simply shake our heads in disbelief or disgust we might just dwell on what lies behind these reactions. The Gospel today gives us a massive clue.

The lost sheep, the lost coin and, par excellence, the lost son, invite us to see the true heart of the Father and the consequence of apostasy. *There is more joy in heaven over one sinner that repents.....*

Think about that for a moment. The one who has been salvaged from sin and brought back to Faith or to Faith for the first time is the occasion for joy in heaven.

The son who has rejected his family and squandered his birthright in sin and shame is welcomed back like a prince the moment he repents and returns. The reason for these extravagant reactions are summed up in the words of the Father to the faithful and disgruntled and jealous son. *'You are with me always and all I have is yours. But it was only right that we celebrate and rejoice because your brother was DEAD and is alive, was lost and is found.'*

Jesus is in no doubt that apostasy, defection, turning one's back on God is death. Not a death inflicted by Sharia court or Mosaic fiat but the logical consequence of turning one's back on the source and sustenance of all life, God.

Though, as Christians, we reject the human imposition of mortal punishment for apostasy, that should in no way dilute the urgency of the Gospel. We know that Man has no right to life or life eternal but by the grace of God. He is free to accept that or reject it. We also know that the price of rejection of the life and love of God has eternal consequence. God gave His only Son, Jesus Christ that, to quote St. John, *'whosoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life'*.

At the heart of the Canon of the Mass, the priest invokes God, through the sacrifice of Christ, to *'command that we be delivered from eternal damnation'*.

The Catholic Faith, in Holy Scripture and in her liturgy, is in no doubt as to what is at stake. It is a life and death matter. That is what the Gospel teaches and what the Church has always believed.

We are living through a time of national apostasy and flabby theology - evangelical inertia and moral indifference is not a Catholic response.

We need to be recaptured by that passion for souls that has always driven the lives of the saints. Do we care if the lost are found? Do we care if the dead are brought back to life? If we do then we are with Jesus. If not then we have strayed into some wholly different religion.

It's an astonishing fact that if everyone here brought one person to Christ each year, within five years we would have 2000 Catholics here at Mass.

Know your stuff. Pray for the people you know who don't know Jesus. Invite them to come alongside and find out more.

And just think of the joy in heaven over every one of those souls brought back to God.

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