



HOMILY by Father Robbie Low

27th Sunday Year C

Fan the flame

Readings: Habakkuk 1: 2-3; 2: 2-4, Ps 94, 2 Timothy 1: 6-8, 13-14, Luke 17: 5-10

I used to be a great fan of newspapers. Not only reading the broadsheets but catching up with last week's scandals from those wrapped round a bit of battered cod and sixpennorth of chips. Now, apart from my local rag, I have stopped buying newspapers. They rarely contain news that has not already been scooped by other media and the majority of the content seems to be a festival of ignorance and fact-free opinion from those whose thoughts would be better dignified by silence.

My last defence for wasting money on the daily newspaper was when I discovered that the paper itself now has so much suppressant on it that you cannot even rely on it to light the fire. Down on my knees with a pair of bellows vainly trying to inflame the paper for the fifth or sixth time was the final straw.

All of this came into my mind on reading today's epistle of Paul to Timothy. 'Fan the flame', says Paul. Clearly St. Paul did not have to compete with soggy copies of the Guardian or one of Mr. Murdoch's comics. Well, indeed not.

The news which Paul had shared with Timothy was profoundly inflammatory. It was the Gospel of Our Lord Jesus Christ. Over the next two hundred and fifty years it would spread like wildfire and in the face of great hostility and frequent

martyrdoms to engulf the whole of the Roman Empire and much of the then known world.

That flame, in not dissimilar conditions, is spreading still – though one might not know it from the agnostic wasteland of the fag end of Western European culture. The flame, to which Paul refers, is that gift which God gave you, as well as Timothy, when Apostolic hands were laid on you in Baptism, Confirmation, Ordination. It is the fire of the Holy Spirit.

The sacrament confers the gift. Whether that fire deepens and spreads depends on what we do next. Whenever a fire is lit there is a lot of jolly and attractive flame, though truth to tell it is neither fully settled into the heart of things nor yet very hot. As the fire settles so it catches and begins to infuse the whole matter in which it manifests. Our little mortal matter, as we grow in sanctity, begins to radiate the love of God as the Holy Spirit dwells ever more deeply and thoroughly.

At that point there are few showy flames but instead there is profound intensity and maximum warmth and divine energy inspiring our own.

There are two things particularly that ‘fan the flames’ of our Faith. One is the activity of the Holy Spirit, the oxygen of our Christian understanding and energy and love. The other is, what St. Paul calls, sound teaching. That is to say the Word of God both written and taught by the Apostles, the Holy Scriptures and the *traditio* of the Church.

All of this we encounter in the Holy Mass. Here the priest invokes the Holy Spirit to presence Christ on the altar. Here also we hear the Word of God and the

teaching of the Church that helps us understand it and act upon it individually and corporately – as part of the Body.

The other thing we know about a fire is that it can go out. The quickest way to put out a burning coal is to remove it from the fire and leave it on its own. Similarly in the Faith. John Wesley remarked that there is no such thing as a solitary Christian. It is a contradiction in terms.

We cannot set up a church in our own front room. We are part of the Body of Christ. Detached from it we can do nothing. Down that road lies heresy and schism. 'I don't need to go to church to be a Christian' is the mantra of the ignorant and careless. Worshipping and working together is part of the deal. We are little brothers and sisters of Christ - not spoilt only children.

The fire of the Holy Spirit is there to inspire us, to energise us, to purify us, to forge us, to enlighten us. It is no accident that the creatures that surround the throne of God are called Seraphim which literally translates as 'the burning ones'. This is not a fire to destruction - that is the fire of Hell. This is the fire of God's love. It is this flame that needs to be fanned in our lives.

Paul tells Timothy and us that we are not given a spirit of 'cowardice' but a spirit of power and love and self control. It is in this spirit that the early church faced martyrdom. It is in this spirit that the Church in much of the world still does face martyrdom at the hands of the enemies of Christ. It is in this spirit that we can surely go out in faith and share the Gospel with those who do not know or love the Lord Jesus or know the truth and therefore the way home to God.