



HOMILY by Father Robbie Low

4th Sunday of Advent Year B

The Ark of the Covenant

Readings: Samuel 7: 1-5, 8-12, 14, 16; Ps 88; Romans 16: 25-27, Luke 1: 26-38

Between the Jewish New Year (Rosh Hashanah) and The Day of atonement (Yom Kippur), lie the Days of Awe and Repentance. These are days when even the most irregular Jew is likely to make his synagogue visit – rather like the nominal Christian breaks cover for the Christmas Carols.

A few days later begins the seventh and final festival of the Jewish year, Succoth, the Feast of Tabernacles. It is primarily a time of rejoicing and has elements of harvest ingathering about it. But it is primarily a time when the Jew remembers his time in the wilderness, the time before he came into the Land of Promise, the forty years when he lived in tents and wandered utterly dependent on the mercy of God and looking forward when he would, one day, be settled.

Every practising Jewish family builds a little shelter outside in the garden or on the balcony and eats there. The more devout may sleep out. It is a beautiful reminder of and reconnection with their and our history in becoming the People of God.

In those days everyone lived in a tent. The Ark of the Covenant dwelt in a tent. They were a travelling people and the Presence of God travelled with them. It was the dream of all that one day, settled in the land, secure in their borders, homes established, a fitting house could be built for their God.

That is the dream of every worshipping community of the Faith. We know that no house that we can build can truly contain the Almighty God from whom all things have their being but we know also that in some peculiar and beautiful way, God has pledged His Presence to us in setting aside these sanctified places be they tents or temples. Human beings are not content to rent a hall, they want to build a shrine fitting to the glory of God and hallow it with prayer and faithfulness.

It was no different for our Jewish forebears. The gorgeous arrays for the Tent of the Presence in the days of wilderness wandering under Moses reach down to the deep desire of King David to build a glorious Temple in the City of Peace, Jerusalem, and on to his son, Solomon, who finally builds it. It is the deep longing of man to have places where prayer is validated and the promise of God's Presence is known.

As we know temples rise and fall. Jerusalem is reduced to a broken wall. Hagia Sophia was a mosque, now a museum. The great shrines of North Africa destroyed by the Islamic invasions. The churches of the atheistic lands shut and the worshippers imprisoned or forced underground. The Feast of Tabernacles reminds us that God has chosen to dwell with His people. If this building were closed tomorrow or bombed or banned, The worship of the Presence would not cease.

God, in His infinite wisdom, prepared a Temple for Himself to dwell in far more durable and beautiful than any human construction. For His Presence He chose an Ark of the Covenant in the shape of an immaculate maiden, filled with grace and utterly obedient to His Word. In the womb of Mary He placed His only begotten Son. Into the arms of Our Lady he entrusted the Eternal Word.

For Him to dwell there that Temple must have been utterly sanctified, utterly holy, utterly disposed to the divine will. In that intimidating beauty and terrifying fragility of Our Lady's humanity rested the hope of humankind. She is the Temple of the Presence and the Church of her Son, when we are being faithful, mirrors that love and sanctity of her very ikon, Mary, mirrors her motherhood, her holiness, her presentation of Christ to the world.

And herein lies the key to the deepest mystery of our Faith. We are to be like Mary. We are to be holy, sanctified, clean, disposed utterly to the will of God, a temple fit for His Presence, the dwelling place of the Holy Spirit of God.

In our baptism we are washed clean of original sin. In the sacrament of reconciliation we are cleansed and renewed. In our receiving of the Body and Blood of Christ at the Mass we are becoming tabernacles of His Presence. As we go out into the world we become presenters of the Presence to the world. That is mission, the supreme task of the Church.

From the pontifical high mass of the basilica to the bog mass of the persecution, from the tents of the wilderness of the pilgrim people of

God to the glorious extravagance of the baroque altar, from the house celebration of the underground church to the noble simplicity of the desert chapel and the whitewashed highway shrine, the mass is the mass is the mass.

Let us walk out under the stars knowing only God as our shelter, purifying ourselves by the sacraments, the sacred promises of His Church, and be ready to be the Temple of His Presence wherever we are called to dwell or to wander and to serve.

As He comes to dwell in us so the mystery of the eternal dwells in the transient of time, the divinity of the All Holy tabernacles in our fragile humanity, the life that is without end transforms our mortality into communion with forever.

This is the mystery of Faith, attested by the saints and lived out by every generation of the Faithful. Now it is our turn to bear the torch of that witness and declare that secret which is at the heart of salvation.

© 2014 Fowey Retreat