



HOMILY by Father Robbie Low

5th Sunday of Easter - Year B

The Teacher of the World

Readings: Acts 9: 29-31, Ps 21, 1 John 3: 18-24, John 15: 1-8

In 2008 Pope Benedict XVI announced the Year of St. Paul. I was very excited. It turned out to be a rather lonely feeling. I was amazed at how little institutional response there was and an almost complete absence of parochial activity. Benedict had judged the problem acutely. There was in the West a longstanding anti- Pauline malaise. Paul was the one who spoiled the Gospel. Paul was a bigot, a misogynist and a homophobe. I had heard such regular chunterings from rafts of liberal Protestant clergy during my previous ministry. I was surprised to hear the same twaddle from some Catholics.

Paul has always been a controversial figure, regarded by Jewish tradition as a traitor. (The Jewish songwriter Leonard Cohen casually puts him in the company of Josef Stalin). Paul is hated by Islam for falsifying the 'true' story of the prophet Jesus, a view incidentally shared by Adolf Hitler who, inter alia, dismissed Christianity as 'Whole hearted Bolshevism under a tinsel of metaphysics.'

The Church however takes a radically different view. She dignifies Paul with the name 'Apostle' and crowns him with the title, 'Teacher of the

World'. So it is always surprising when people rejoicing in the name 'Christian' place themselves in a camp which rejects revelation in Holy Scripture and the authoritative teaching of the Church.

This morning we encounter Saul/Paul in his early career as an evangelist.

He has been relatively newly converted and converts are often a nuisance. They arrive with far too much enthusiasm and expectation. Paul has been baptised in Damascus. Sent to destroy the followers of 'The Way', he has, instead, pitched up at synagogue and preached the Gospel, contending for the Faith. The 'Christians' are not sure how to handle him. Is he genuine or is it a trap to flush out the faithful prior to a mass purge. The regular Jews are outraged by this agent of Jerusalem authorities suddenly changing sides. A plot to murder him is foiled by lowering him down over the city walls in a basket.

Paul pitches up in Jerusalem where the same divisions and anxieties are magnified. Only the intercession of Barnabas gets him an audience with the Apostles. Further rows and friction arise in the wake of his preaching. Another murder plot fomented and he is sent packing back home to Tarsus to cool his heels.

The Acts records simply, 'So the Church all over Galilee, Judaea and Samaria enjoyed peace and was built up in the fear of the Lord and the power of the Holy Spirit.'

You can feel, in those few words of St. Luke, an enormous relief, a collective 'Phew!'

Two things have happened here, both of immense significance.

One is that, via Paul, Jesus has directly reminded the Apostles of their task. Paul has understood that this is not just another Jewish sect like Pharisees or Sadducees. It is the Universal Church. It is the fulfilment of the promise to Abraham that in him will all the nations of the earth will be blessed and the true vocation of Israel is bringing back the whole world to God. Paul gets it. The hesitant, fearful disciples, who are busy building up the homeland communities, are powerfully reminded of the Great Commission –‘Go into the whole world.....’

So God uses the radical enthusiasm of the convert to energise the home community. But it does not end there. Paul is sent back to Tarsus and made to wait for a decade or more before the Council of Jerusalem validates his visionary encounter with Christ and the consequent Gentile mission.

Does he resent? Does he fume? Does he disobey?

Does he found his own ‘church’ that knows better than the Apostles? NO.

Paul is obedient. He knows that God is in charge of His Church and that he must be obedient to her and wait until she calls him to serve. Many of the greatest servants of God have had to be similarly patient. In the meantime Paul serves where he is put and prepares himself both with study that will bear fruitful in the glorious epistles and with hardship in the deserts of Arabia that will toughen him against the years of physical suffering that lie ahead and the profound loneliness of prophetic

ministry. What emerges from these dramatic encounters is the profound and enduring work of the Holy Spirit.

What flows from the time of ecclesial discernment is a Church intelligently ready for its universal mission.

What is forged in the long years of patience and obedience is a servant who will become the greatest evangelist in history and who continues, by the inspired Word of God, to be indeed, 'The Teacher of the World.

Paul is not an easy man to be around – the Apostles knew that - but if you want to know more about Jesus, he's your man and if you want to walk alongside a man with his heart on fire for God and for the salvation of Man, they don't come any bigger.

In this time of the New Evangelisation, Holy Paul, Pray for us.

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