



HOMILY by Father Robbie Low

6th Sunday of Easter - Year B

God has no favourites

Readings: Acts 25-26, 34-35, 44-48, Ps 97, 1 John 4: 7-10, John 15: 19-17

The most successful head of my Youth Club in the 1980s – now a woman in her late forties with two college kids – sent me a birthday present a few years ago, which I still treasure. It is an evangelical T-shirt with a lovely ‘photo’ of Jesus on the front and the legend, in bold type, ‘Jesus loves YOU’. Slightly more discreet and just underneath it adds, ‘But **I**’m His Favourite’.

Needless to say there have not been a lot of missiological opportunities for wearing this thoughtful gift. But it came back to me this week when I was preparing the Readings for Mass today.

Last week, you will recall, St. Paul had to be successively hooped out of Damascus and Jerusalem for the contentious preaching of ‘Christ for the world’, the inclusion of the Gentiles, you and me. In short Paul preaches the vision of the Universal Church.

The Church did not seem quite ready to embrace its Catholic mandate.

But here another chapter unfolds. The Prince of Apostles, St. Peter is in Joppa, a seaside town, the town from which Jonah attempted his flight. But Peter is unlikely to have got much fresh air as he was, we are told, staying with Simon the Tanner and there are few more olfactory offensive places than a tannery. They stink.

Here it is that Peter is granted the vision of the sheet filled with all manner of foods that God now declares clean, permitted, kosher. Peter is deeply puzzled by this because, as an observant Jew, he has always kept the food laws.

While this is going on, a good day's journey down the coast, a gentile centurion is praying to God when an angel appears and tells him to send men to Joppa and find Peter. They find Peter, newly perplexed by his vision, and relate Cornelius' extraordinary prayer time and ask Peter to return with them, which he does.

The encounter between the Apostle and the Centurion is one of the most moving moments in Scripture. The powerful battle hardened gentile commander waits on the servant of God to instruct him in the Faith. It is here that so many things become clear to Peter.

He finally comprehends the message that St. Paul brings from his encounter with Christ. The Great Commission of Christ, before His Glorious Ascension, falls into place. The rooftop vision of a day ago makes utter sense. Peter declares 'Truly I now understand that God has no favourites.'

This is hugely significant because the Jewish mindset is clear that they are 'chosen' and special. Hence the separation, not least in diet. Peter's revelation takes us back behind that choosing. They were chosen in order to witness to God, serve the world and bring the whole world back to a knowledge and love of God. This is the purpose of the coming of Jesus and the mainspring of His Body on earth, The Church.

We were chosen, not because we were so marvellous, - Paul tells us elsewhere that God put his treasure in clay pots so there would be no doubt to whom the glory belonged. (2 Cor. 4 v 7)

Therefore Paul is right. The borders of the Church cannot be the Jewish community alone. The borders of the Church cannot be simply in mission to our own, practising or lapsed. The vision is clear. The food laws have been abrogated because there cannot be two tables, two separate communities, Jew and Gentile, but one Universal Church offering salvation and reconciliation to the world through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

It is why successive Popes bang on about ecumenism – not because they want us to attend endless tedious meetings but because Christ wills that His Church be one. All Christians should be part of the Universal Church.

We do not know the religion of the Centurion but he was a God fearer. Most likely he had been initiated into Mithraism, a sort of military freemasonry popular at the time. What we do know is that he was a seeker and a pray-er.

Please note what St. Peter does. He instructs Cornelius and his household in the simple basics of the Christian Faith – no frills. Cornelius doesn't know the basics. Why should he? That is where we are in the society to which we minister and mission. They do not know the basics, the bare minimum. We must assume nothing when we talk to people of Jesus. Most of them don't even know the outline history of salvation.

And finally, note this.....

While Peter is still teaching them the Faith, the Holy Spirit descends on them all and they begin exhibiting the gifts of that same Holy Spirit.

By rights they should have waited until they were baptised..... but mission is often untidy. They hear the Word, the proclamation of Christ, and the Spirit descends. We need to be prepared for God to act sovereignly. We need to be prepared for His intervention. Conversion is, after all, His work. Peter does what we must do.

He goes where he is sent and tells those who will listen about Jesus. The hearts, the venue, the logistics, the timing are all in God's hands.

We are simply to go and remember God has no favourites – just other lost sons and daughters He wants to bring home to the Universal Church of Jesus Christ.