



HOMILY by Father Robbie Low

26th Sunday in Ordinary Time - Year B

Anyone who is not against us is for us

Readings: Numbers 11: 25-29, Ps 18, James 5: 1-6, Mark 9: 38-43, 45, 47-48

Jesus said: 'Anyone who is not against us is for us.'

When I began my ministry, nearly forty years ago in London's East End, Tower Hamlets was beginning to see the large scale movements that would turn it into the Asian Quarter. In those days our parish had care of two church schools and there was a strong desire among Muslim families to get their children into them. One family, the Khans, already had their two children at St. Matthias and they were among our star pupils.

They lived in the worst and most sordid tower block in our patch – a dumping ground for the richer areas of London's unwanted, feckless and addicted. I was keen to get them out and was finally delighted to be able to tell Mr. Khan that his family had been offered a move. When I arrived, through the surrounding squalor, at the Khan's immaculate little flat Mr. Khan was very sorrowful. He could not move. I was astounded and rehearsed all the arguments for getting his children out of this sink of iniquity. He agreed but could not move. 'WHY?' I almost shouted at him.

'You see, Father,' he said ' the most important thing for our children is a godly education and this new flat, while very lovely, is not in the catchment area of your church school where our children are so happy and we know they will learn about Jesus and all the things of God.'

I explained to the family that they could not lose their places at our Christian school. The Khans duly moved. I never forgot the remarkable priorities of this little talented and faithful immigrant family. I still have a framed decorated bible verse given to me by their daughter on matriculation.

Wind on fifteen years and I was in my own parish which had a strong Orthodox Jewish community and the Rabbi and I became great friends. There was also growing Bengali presence. When I finished my evening rounds I would often end up, late night, at the Sonargaon – still the best curries I have ever eaten.

One evening the owner, Mr Chowdhury, was clearly troubled. His young son, it turned out, was seriously ill. I naturally offered to pray for him. Mr Chowdhury was grateful but he wondered also if I had any Holy Water about my person. I did not but, while my Chicken Safar Khan was marinading in a sea of wild herbs, almond, coconut and cream and my lamb green massala was wrapping itself in garlic, ginger and pomegranate, I legged it the hundred yards down to the church and back.

I had my dinner. Mr Chowdhury shot home with the healing waters.

A week later I bumped into Bashir on the High Street. How was the boy?

'He is well', exuded Bashir, wreathed in smiles. 'Your holy water is zam zam.' It was only when I got home that it dawned on me what Mr. Chowdhury had just said. It was, in his faith, the highest possible compliment. Zam Zam is the holy well of Mecca.

Fast forward to earlier this summer. I was invited back to preach and celebrate at the wedding of an old friend's daughter. They are Bombay Christians, the groom was from a Hindu family. As the registers were being signed and before the Mass began, I talked to the groom's parents, Mr & Mrs Anand. Dad told me how much of the Bible he had read.

I invited them to come up for a blessing at the time of communion. The Dad said they would love to but did not know what to do or when, so I explained and would nod in their direction at the right moment.

As the Communion proceeded I nodded and, one by one, the whole Hindu side of the church rose to receive a Christian blessing. It was immensely moving.

Late that night as we were leaving the magnificent party, the mother, Mrs Anand, grasped my hand and her husband's and said, 'You do know that we love Jesus.' Not something, I reflected, that you hear every day in a Christian setting.

Why am I telling you all this?

Well this morning's Bible readings show God's spirit turning up in unlooked for places and Jesus telling His disciples, 'Anyone who is not against us is for us.'

We live in a world that is returning to destructive polarisation. We are anxious about the other, his culture, his intentions and, often, not without reason. But, in the midst of this burgeoning hostility and misunderstanding, we must not miss the moments of grace. We must not assume the other man is our enemy. We may one day be grateful for his generosity and goodwill is a two way street. We are to accept the little gifts that come our way in serving Jesus and strive always and everywhere to demonstrate the loving mercy of God in the everyday as well as the extraordinary. I would not want any less for the Khan children, the Chowdhury children, the Rabbi's children, the Anand's children than for my own.

And what of them? Well, the Khan's eldest daughter is a doctor serving her people, as she hoped, in Bangladesh and when I last had a meal in the Sonargaon it was in the capable hands of Bashir's handsome son. Just last week I got an email asking me to speak at the Rabbi's retirement party as an old and trusted friend. Next year I hope I might hear the newlyweds need a priest to baptise an extra member of the familybut I'm not putting any pressure on just yet.

Don't miss the moments of grace. Assume the best. The genuine seekers after God will become clear and we need, where we can, to hold each other's hands against the forces of the dark and in celebration of God's infinite mercy to Man.

'If anyone gives you a cup of water to drink because you belong to Christ, then I tell you solemnly, he will not lose his reward'.