



HOMILY by Father Robbie Low

2nd Sunday of Advent - Year C

The mercy of God in a Year of Mercy

Readings: Baruch 5:1-9, Ps 125, Philippians 1:3-6, 8-11, Luke 3:1-6

When I was about eight years old I remember being taken Christmas shopping in Oxford Street. The street was abuzz with happy hedonists and, in those days, cash strapped consumers hunting gifts for loved ones.

Amidst all this stood a rather dopey looking man with a sandwich board which bore the legend, 'REPENT – THE END IS NIGH'.

Behind him, on the proverbial soapbox, a short angry man was ranting about the fate of sinners. He managed to do this, apparently without drawing breath, for some considerable time. He stared into the middle distance, no eye contact, while he delivered the judgement on the passing condemned and with a sense of smug satisfaction that indicated he may have been shocked and disappointed if anyone had stopped and asked, 'Then how can I be saved?'

At Advent we traditionally dwell on the Second Coming of Christ, the end of the world and the Four Last Things, Death, Judgement, Heaven and Hell. It focuses our mind on ultimate things, including our own life.

Christ may or may not come in my lifetime but the End is always nigh for someone and one day soon that someone will be me. The older you get the nigher it gets, seemingly rushing towards you on roller skates.

What the man with the sandwich board advertised and the shouty little preacher gave voice to is not wrong. John the Baptist said the same. What was wrong was their Calvinist joylessness and satisfaction in the fate of the condemned.

The Church calls on sinners to repent. But she does so because she reflects the heart of mercy that is God's. She longs for the salvation of all and there are no lengths she will not go to in order to rescue the lost. We know that because Her Master and exemplar, Jesus Christ, went to the Tree of Calvary to save sinners – you and me.

The problem for our time, as missionaries in this deeply secularised little corner of a civilisation that has abandoned its heritage of the Faith, is that no-one out there understands the language any more. Relativism – ‘your truth and mine’ – situation ethics (moral response depending on the circumstance) – and the abolition of sin as a commonly understood concept have destroyed the *lingua franca*, the common tongue and left us much work to do in proclaiming the Good News of Jesus Christ.

When the Church proclaims ‘SALVATION’, the response of most modernists would be, ‘Salvation from what?’ They either don't believe in an afterlife or, extraordinarily, assume they have got a place in the Heaven of the God they don't believe in.

When the Church proclaims 'A Year of Mercy', she does so in the face of a culture that has no concept of its need for mercy. If the Year of Mercy degenerates into a feeble 'Never mind eh!' on our personal failings and an 'Ah, Bless' routine towards the popular culture and in the mind of the people it will have been a profound waste of time and a shocking deceit.

Truly proclaimed 'Mercy' is not a soft option. Mercy is the great gift of transforming love and forgiveness which is the other side of judgement. A man who had been neither arrested, charged, tried, convicted nor sentenced would think it passing bonkers if he received a letter from the Court telling him he had been pardoned.

A man needs to know his need of God's mercy. To know our need of mercy is to be aware of the truth of our situation.

Repentance is about being grown up. Repentance is about facing up to the reality of self and the love of God. Repentance is about acknowledging who we really are and, in His loving purposes, whom God intended us to be. Repentance prepares the heart. Repentance is the first step on the road of following Jesus.

It is why the Baptist stood preaching on Jordan's banks. It is why the Church calls her children home through the Sacrament of Reconciliation. It is why Jesus empowered the Apostolic Ministry with the priceless gift of Absolution, the preserve of God alone operating through His Church. It is why we go out, each one of us, as missionaries, to seek the lost and bring them to that encounter with Jesus which will transform their lives as surely as it has transformed ours.

We know, or should know, from the Sacrament of Reconciliation, what that means. When we kneel at the foot of the Cross and expose to our loving Saviour the sins that have wounded Him, we are on holy ground. We kneel in the Presence of the Majesty and we know how far short we fall of the Glory of God. A properly prepared confession, in the company of an attentive priestly companion, invites the divine activity of the Holy Spirit to descend on the confessional. From a place of sorrow and unburdening it becomes truly the ground of reconciliation as the Father puts His arms around us. The misery of our failings and follies laid at the foot of the Cross encounter the wellspring of mercy. We know our need of God. We know His love for us. The Confessional is the place of Liberation, Renewal and Joy.

When we walk away forgiven it is that joy in our hearts that should fuel the mission of the Church. That is the Salvation we want for all men.

How can we not invite them home to such a loving Lord?

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