



HOMILY by Father Robbie Low

### **1<sup>st</sup> Sunday in Lent – Year C**

***Lord have mercy, Lord have mercy***

*Readings: Deuteronomy 26: 4-10, Ps 90, Romans 10: 8-13, Luke 4: 1-13*

In the spring of the same summer in which her first grandchild would be born my grandmother returned to die in the old family home. She was not dying of anything in particular – old age (she was nearly ninety) and physical exhaustion had caught up with her.

Lillian Hephzibah had been such a vital and vibrant part of my life that I had no hesitation in immediately journeying home. She had taken to bed in the little room overlooking the garden that had been my abode before I left for college years before.

My mother met me at the door in a calm but confused state. She was, she said, embarrassed by my beloved grandma's latest outburst. Lillian had, according to my mother, hauled herself out of bed and cast herself prostrate on the floor saying simply, again and again, 'Lord have mercy, Lord have mercy.'

We were not a notably religious family. My grandfather was an English republican baptised on his deathbed and my mother was still twenty years

from her own conversion. I was the first family member to go to church regularly in an hundred years. So my mother saw something shamefully weak in my grandmother's humble appeal.

My grandmother, with whom I had often discussed the Faith, I knew had a gloomy view. Unlike today when 'mercy' seems to be given away with the cornflakes and everybody expects to go to Heaven, my grandmother's Victorian generation was haunted by the opposite heresy – only moral perfection would get you through the gates. 'Almost persuaded.....but lost' was the hymn line that haunted her.

I tried to persuade my mother that this simple prayer, Lord have mercy, was the only sane prayer a dying man could make and that, if I had breath at the last, I hoped it would be mine too.

All this came flooding back to me after Mass last week when we were 'lucky dipping' for a saint to accompany us through Lent. A lady opened her ticket and asked me, 'Who is Saint Dismas'? He is, of course, the penitent thief.

All we know about him is that he shared Calvary with Jesus and when his other fellow condemned berated Jesus, Dismas replied with a statement about himself and a prayer to Jesus:

*'One of the criminals who were hanged railed at him, saying, "If you are the Christ? Save yourself and us!" But the other (Dismas) rebuked him, saying, "Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed justly; for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong.'* (Luke 23 v 41)

Dismas acknowledges his own sin and the justice of the judgement. He owns up to who he truly is. That is the first spiritual step.

Then he turns to Jesus, the sinless one, in prayer with his failing breath *“Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.”* He acknowledges Jesus as Lord and asks for His mercy. He owns his need of God. That is the second step.

Am I jumping ahead here in Lent? Well in a way but look at the readings for today. What delineates the people of God in the Deuteronomy lesson is they acknowledge who they are and where they came from. ‘We were nobodies. We had nothing. We were slaves. God chose us. God called us. God freed us. God gave us everything we have. We return in thanksgiving and offer to God the first and best of what we have. We worship.’ That is the pattern of salvation.

Now look at the Epistle: St. Paul tells us that, *‘by believing from the heart you are made righteous; by confessing with your lips you are saved’*. Believing that is not just an intellectual assent but a deep conviction and trust in Jesus is the way of sanctification. Confessing, telling others about Jesus, is the way of salvation. The two are inextricably linked.

The way of ruin is exemplified by the other thief, the impenitent one, and by Satan himself in the Temptations. They both begin their response to Jesus by doubt and arrogance. *‘If you are the Son of God’, ‘If you are the Christ’...‘Do what I tell you.’* The creature denies then commands the Creator – a dangerous absurdity. Begin with doubt and distrust and disaffection and disrespect and it opens the doorway to doom.

Begin with humble acknowledgement of who you truly are...that is what Lent is for. Recognise everything that Jesus has done for you. Come to trust Him utterly. Praise Him as Lord. Seek His unfailing mercy that He offers to all who both believe and confess.

For that mercy is not just the forgiveness of sins but a place in the Kingdom, a relationship of the deepest kind with God Himself, a friendship in which He continues to pour out the gifts of His infinite love both in this little desert of our mortality and through all eternity to come.

This Lent, lie with Lillian on the floor of your heart, acknowledge who you are and what Jesus has done for you. Offer Him your very best. It is all in the prayer, 'Lord have mercy'. Then hear the truly amazing promise of Our Lord, Jesus, to the dying penitent, Dismas. *'Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise.'*

Have a joyful and holy Lent with whichever saint you providentially 'dipped'. They all know both the desert and the road to Calvary. They have all trusted and confessed. They all now dwell in the glory of the miracle of the Third Day and they can and will help us on our way.

And, if you get stuck, remember Dismas.