



HOMILY by Father Robbie Low

3rd Sunday in Lent – Year C

Fruitless fig or fertile soil?

Readings: Exodus 3:1-8, 13-15, Ps 102, 1 Corinthians 10:1-6, 10-12, Luke 13:1-9

While the whole of Great Britain settles down to four months of interminable 'In – Out' debate on Europe, much of Europe's attention is turned towards a growing, deepening and more profound crisis. The Mediterranean coasts and the land borders of our continent are being overwhelmed by a flood tide of humanity. Some are desperate survivors of merciless regional wars. Some are simply looking for a better life. All are looking to Europe.

The response of Europe is both conflicted and concerned. No-one can watch the nightly news without a heart for the refugee. Similarly no-one in Europe can imagine that the long term solution to Middle Eastern and African problems lie in the wholesale transfer of continental populations. The different states of Europe are at loggerheads. While rich Germany gave the green light to the would-be Europeans, poor and beholden Greece has announced that it cannot be a 'warehouse for souls'. Hungary closes her borders, Croatia waves the migrants on, Austria tightens up.

Behind these varying reactions is a millennium of history. For the Balkan states, Greece and Austria, they fear the Islamicisation that enslaved their forefathers in the Ottoman Empire. For the Germans there is a different crisis. With the lowest birth rate in the world they need approximately half a million new workers per year to prop up the economy and pay the pensions of the huge number of natives shortly to retire.

Behind the headlines of compassion versus carelessness, it is demography that is the dictator. Whatever the future of Germany and Europe, one thing is becoming clear – migrants like having families, natives do not. Much of this decline in old Europe emanates from a wholesale rejection of Church teaching on marriage, children and family life. The prophetic writing of Blessed Pope Paul VI in 1968, *Humanae Vitae*, was largely derided in Europe and rejected in practice. We live with the result of deliberately chosen unfruitfulness. The consequence is inevitable decline.

In today's Gospel Jesus reflects on the unfruitful fig. His verdict is uncomfortable to put it mildly. One more chance and, if it does not produce fruit, dig it up. It's a waste of space.

Jesus is talking here about more than childbearing. He is talking about a greater crisis that can afflict the Church. He is not talking about contraceptive culture that does not want to have children. That would have been unthinkable in His day. But He is talking about a contraceptive spirit – one that does not produce the fruits of the Spirit and has no interest in conceiving spiritual children. While the Church in the second and third world has burgeoned, European Christianity has been seemingly unable or unwilling to take on the key tasks of evangelisation which alone renew the Church's life by fulfilling her primary task and bringing people to

new birth in Christ. We have, very often, been content to see our brothers and sisters from overseas be the new growth in our community. It is great to have them and their devotion inspires us but does not remove our duty to those who do not yet know or love Jesus.

In order to be fruitful we have to fulfil certain conditions.

We have to be absolutely and unconditionally open to the transforming love of God in our ever deepening relationship with Jesus. We have to be willing to be fruitful, open to the gifts of the Holy Spirit. We have to long for spiritual children AND all the joys and trials that can bring. Like natural children, spiritual children are hard but wonderful work. At first we carry them and welcome them into a loving home where everyone wants the best for each other and all are particularly mindful of the needs of the newest, youngest member of the family. The newborn soul needs feeding on the Word of God and then the Sacraments. We encourage the first steps in faith.

Always we look to God our Father and the Church our Mother to help us in helping each other with wisdom, love, encouragement and guidance. Some are called to marriage and natural family life but not all.

But we are all called to be open to having spiritual children. A church that has no desire for spiritual children, converts, is an oxymoron, a contradiction in terms, antagonistic to Evangelism, has no desire to be The Bride of Christ, has no longing to bring others to new birth in Christ.

We have to constantly remind ourselves that the Catholic Church is not for

Catholics. It exists for the world that Jesus gave His life to save. We are called to be His servants in this great matter. So a few questions to wrestle with for all of us, priest and people alike.

Do I long for spiritual children? Do I care about the eternal destiny of all those people out there who do not know or love Jesus?

Is my heart and my church community a place of welcome where others may find a home? Am I friendly to the newcomer or does my definition of a friendly church just mean that I have friends here?

Do I talk about Jesus to others? Do I spend more time talking about what is right with Jesus than what is wrong with the Church?

Am I equipped for the task of helping others in the Way of Christ? If I need help, education, advice do I ask for it? Remember we can't pass on what we haven't got.

Do I pray regularly for opportunities to share the Faith? Do I ask for the courage to take them when they come? Do I pray for those I will meet today? Do I keep my witness simple and personal?

Do I have a contraceptive heart...the demography of a dying church... or do I long to be part of an ever growing family of faith? The fruitless fig or the fertile soil? Our Lady presents Christ to the world. The Church follows her example. We are that Church or we are nothing and that is our calling.