



HOMILY by Father Robbie Low

5th Sunday of Easter – Year C

Be faithful

Readings: Acts 14: 21-27, Ps 144, Ap 21: 1-5, John 13: 31-35

When I first became a Catholic I had the privilege of making my confession to a very wise, learned and shrewd spiritual director. At the end of the Sacrament of Reconciliation he said to me, 'I am going to give you a wonderful penance.'

I had been warned, in my preparation, that a lot of priests are miserly in their gifts of penance and restrict themselves to a Gloria or a couple of Hail Marys so I was quite excited. After all in more serious times the confessor might have sent you on a spiritual quest or even off to the Crusades! I did not think I was quite ready for that but I was expectant. My confessor said simply, 'Re-read The Acts of the Apostles'.

In the dozen or so years that have passed since I have not been given a more joyful or productive penance. It gave me the time and the context for a recapitulation of my own spiritual journey, an opportunity for profound thanksgiving for reconciliation with God and a further insight into the beauty of the Catholic Church in the company of the great saints. Now I am sure that a rigorous spiritual director would warn me against the danger of boasting about a penance and that is not my intention.

For a quick reader the Acts of the Apostles would take the same time as listening to the Omnibus edition of The Archers. For slower readers perhaps a quiet 'telly-free' evening. No matter.

The reason I mention this is because Holy Mother Church gives to all of us, in the daily and Sunday liturgy, the opportunity to do this. One of the great joys of the Easter and Pentecostal seasons is that the lection allows us to dive into the first volume of the history of the Church and share the excitement of those living in the light of the Resurrection and observe their trials and triumphs, revelations and reversals and above all their faithfulness, conviction and joy which would one day bring the good news of Jesus to the four corners of the known world.

We are, just now as we were last week, in the middle of Paul's first missionary journey – albeit it in highly edited form. So let's enjoy it for a moment and see what we might learn.

Paul and Barnabas, newly ordained, set off on mission. This is the moment Paul has been waiting for years. The Church has put him on hold, this excitable, brilliant, terrifying convert and, at last, they unleash him. We learn from this long delay the necessary patience of vocation and the wisdom of the Church. Paul obediently waits for the confirmation of authority before he embarks on the mission God gave him on the Damascus Road.

We are with Paul when he curses and overturns the malicious sorcerer in Salamis who is blocking the work of the Gospel. We learn to expect the works of the enemy wherever the true Faith is preached. (The Devil need

not bother about the spiritually inert or those he has already captured. But he is always busy trying to thwart the work of the true Apostolic ministry.)

We hear Paul's first major sermon. Like Peter's at Pentecost, it traces salvation history. It proclaims the kingship of Christ. It calls for repentance. It announces the Resurrection hope. It is iconic preaching.

We witness Paul and Barnabas go to the synagogues, the very places you might expect the most enthusiasm for news of the Messianic fulfilment. Instead they receive rejection because the Gospel would interfere too much with the settled way of life and require repentance and renewal.

The most excited and responsive people are those outside the Faith. Just as God told Paul in his vision, the mission to the gentiles, the outsiders, is his major work and it is the future. All communities of the Faith need to take care not to domesticate the Word of God and resent its challenge.

The Apostles preach and teach and heal. They make enemies. They make converts. They are irrepressible. In one town they are mistaken for gods then, after some poisonous gossip and backstage plotting, Paul is taken and stoned and left for dead. Today's passage begins in the wake of that stoning. Paul pulls his battered body together and goes right back into that same city and preaches the Gospel and converts many. 'As I was saying....'

We meet them today on the return journey where they revisit the new communities of Faith. The scripture tells us that they 'exhort' the faithful. They warn of the suffering that will come in the Lord's service. Andthey ordain priests for those communities. The weak translation 'they appointed elders' is really the Greek word 'They stretched out their hands

over', 'They ordained'. So they left in place a Gospel foundation and a sign of Apostolic authority both in the Sacramental life of the Church and in her local governance. It is the same pattern of Apostolic ministry that has sustained and governed, taught and sanctified the Church of Jesus Christ for two thousand years. Wherever there has been departure from this divine order there has been heresy and schism.

Finally Paul and Barnabas return to tell the Jerusalem Apostles and disciples about the mission. They tell the story. They give testimony. They encourage the Church. The gateway to the Gentile world is open. The task they had been given has been fulfilled. Was it easy? No. Was it 100% successful? No. Was everything neat and tidy? No.

BUT....they had faithfully done what they were commissioned to do.

That is our task even today. When we try to carry out the ministry and mission of the Church, some will rejoice, some will stone us. Some will repent. Some will turn away in bitterness. Some will seek to build up, some to destroy. Our task remains simply to do the job we were called to. At the end of all things the Lord will not ask us if we were successful but if we were faithful.