



HOMILY by Father Robbie Low

## 15<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year C

### ***Go and do likewise***

*Readings: Isaiah 66: 10-14, Ps 65, Galatians 6: 14-18, Luke 10: 1-12, 17-20*

Some stories are so familiar you can tell them in your sleep..... and thereby hangs a problem. We know it so well that its edge has gone and it becomes merely a story about interracial do-gooding.

When I was a bright eyed bushy tailed young curate I used to take assemblies in five schools every week. One morning I bounced into Woolmore school, which bordered the northern entry to the Blackwall Tunnel and was under the shadow of the old East India Dock, ready to tell the story of the Good Samaritan.

‘A Samaritan was on his way from Jerusalem to Jericho’, I enthused...

One or two more spiritually alert teachers could see this wasn’t going to end well but I sailed on in my certainty. Finally it dawned on me that, in my haste and familiarity, I had started the story the wrong way round. The logical outcome of my version was rather different from that of Jesus. Mine had to end.... ‘The only good Samaritan is a dead Samaritan’

In order to recapture the power of Jesus' story we need to, not only tell it right and put away that anaesthetising familiarity, but go back a bit.

Who were the Samaritans? Why would one being good be such a shock?

The Samaritan schism dates variously to the division of the Kingdom of Israel after Solomon and the apostasy in the north against which Elijah raged. It takes in the replacement of Jerusalem as the central site for the northerners and the reintroduction of worship of the Golden Calf of the Exodus – or an outbreak of 'mad cow disease' as one of my scholarly friends dubs it. It becomes a dispute, after the Jews return from the Babylonian exile, about who is a Jew. The returners claim that the motley crew who have inhabited Samaria, the great city of the northern kingdom, are a bunch of half breeds settled there by Assyrian warlords and conducting pagan worship. The Samaritans claim that they are the true descendants of the tribes of Ephraim and Manasses and Levi and that the ragbag of returners are illegitimate and are making it up as they go along.

To the Jew a Samaritan was a foreigner and a pagan and a collaborator with the enemy powers. To the Samaritan the Jew was a Johnny come lately fantasist who was denying history and distorting the tradition and hijacking the Torah. (The name Samaritan means the Guardian or Watcher of the Torah). It comes as no surprise then to learn that they were forbidden to even give each other the time of day. Hence the recent Gospel about the Samaritan towns turning Jesus away because he was heading to Jerusalem and James' and John's, to us, overreaction. 'Lord let's call down fire on these Samaritan towns!'

'The GOOD SAMARITAN', to a Jew of Jesus' day, is an oxymoron. We might just as well say, 'The Good Nazi' or the 'The Good Terrorist'. Indeed, when Jesus gets to the end of His parable, having demolished the racial stereotype, and asks the smart-arsed lawyer to say who was the real neighbour to the man who fell among thieves, the lawyer cannot even bring the hated word 'Samaritan' onto his lips. Providentially so.

He replies, 'The one who had mercy'. And that is the key. For all the historical bitterness and rage and racism and hostility and pain and offence and outrage, the Good Samaritan is moved by compassion for his unknown enemy and acts with extraordinary mercy and at some risk to his own life and financial wellbeing. In this he reflects the heart of God.

Catholics were reminded of the enormity of this gift by this last week's calendar of saints. On Wednesday we celebrated St. Maria Goretti. For those who don't know, Maria was a twelve year old girl who lived in Italy 1890-1902. Poverty had led the family to move and share a house with another family with older boys. Maria's father died. One of the boys, Alessandro Serenelli, fired by lust, took his chance. Maria refused to be dishonoured. Alessandro, enraged, bound her and stabbed her repeatedly. Maria took twenty hours to die. She forgave him on her deathbed. It is usually told as a tale of innocence and the virtue of purity and, God knows, we need that in these debauched times. But I am always heart-moved by what comes next.

Alessandro narrowly avoided the lynch mob and got thirty years hard labour. For seven of those he remained arrogant and impenitent. Then Maria came to him in vision and in dreams and his heart broke and he became a penitent. He was released, at the end of his sentence, in the year of Maria's beatification. Ten years later Alessandro knelt beside Maria's mother to receive Holy Communion. Years later he was in the crowd for her canonisation. He spent the rest of his life as gardener and lay brother in a Capuchin monastery – ever grateful for the mercy he had received.

As a father I struggle with the idea of Maria's mother kneeling beside Alessandro at the Communion rail. Could I kneel beside a man, however penitent, who had murdered my daughter? Who could forgive someone who has killed their child by their sinfulness?

And then the glory dawns – for God Himself gives me, being penitent, communion in the full knowledge that it is my sins that crucified His Beloved Son, Jesus. It is my pride that hammered the nails into His hands of blessing. It is my anger that has pinioned the feet of the Gospel of peace. It is my lust and greed and envy and idleness that has pierced the side of the only begotten Son of God.

When I kneel before the mercy seat of God, before the altar of sacrifice, I am the penitent thief. I am Alessandro Serenelli – ever grateful for the prayers of the saints, ever grateful for the inexhaustible mercy of God. Jesus tells me to 'GO.....and DO LIKEWISE'. How can I refuse?