



HOMILY by Father Robbie Low

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

### ***Abraham intercedes for Sodom***

*Readings: Genesis 18: 20-32, Ps 137, Colossians 2: 12-14, Luke 11: 1-13*

Last Sunday night I was three hundred miles from here, sitting in a packed theatre in Watford. The occasion that had drawn me there was the retirement of a friend of nearly thirty years standing, with whom I had worked the same patch in ministry for some fifteen of those years. Our places of worship were directly opposite one another on the busy main road and our homes within a few yards of one another. Our conversations had ranged over family, faith and friendship and our mutual pastoral concerns and we have kept in touch over the years since my return home to Cornwall.

The retiree is a very remarkable man. Quiet, understated, brilliant, shrewd and utterly faithful in his holiness and commitment to God and a great family man. On Sunday night his community had to hire the theatre because they couldn't get everyone into their very large place of worship.

The man in question is Rabbi Meir Salasnik. He and his wife, Judy, had served their community for thirty seven years and, in that time, grown a

small congregation of less than two hundred into a worshipping community of more than two thousand souls.

It is a remarkable achievement and the evening heard tributes from MPs, Prime Ministers and Ambassadors at one end and from the Synagogue caretaker, the mother of a handicapped boy and members of the congregation at the other. Chief Rabbis, past and present, - one of whom Rabbi Meir had beaten to the post at Bushey - were fulsome in their praise. My task, as an old friend, was to bring the greetings of the Christian community to this amazing family party.

What drew Rabbi Meir and I together from the first meeting was our common understanding of the place of the community of Faith in society and our determination to preach and teach our people the orthodox faith and absolute respect for the Word of God. Our aim was, to quote the advert, 'to do what it says on the tin'.

Today's Old Testament reading has a lot to say about our common heritage in Faith and our place, as believers, in the world.

As co-inheritors of the Abrahamic Faith, we watch his family – wanderers in this world, as we are - before the Cities of the Plain, Sodom and Gomorrah – bywords for wickedness, unholiness, godlessness. The family of Faith is 'in this world but not of it'. But it is also here to intercede for it. So the great, famous and delightfully Jewish negotiation begins. Abraham challenges the justice that will destroy the just man with the sinner. Is 50 just men enough to save Sodom? Is 45, 40, 30, 20, 10?

At each turn God's mercy is seen to be just and incredibly generous. The negotiation stops at TEN. This is significant because TEN is the number required for a quorum (a *minyan*) for public worship. It is also an economic reality for the community. If there are ten households tithing (giving ten per cent of their disposable income) then you can afford to support your own rabbi.

Less than TEN and there is no worshipping community. No worshipping community, no intercession, no witness left to God, no hope of life. Abraham's negotiation sets the tone for the whole Judeo-Christian understanding of justice and mercy. It reveals the tension between the utter holiness of God, the disastrous sinfulness of Man and the longing for the salvation of His fallen creatures that will culminate in the sacrifice of the Cross of Jesus and resonates through the intercession of our founding forefather in Faith, Abraham.

It underlines the place of the worshipping community in the world. It is in the world but not of it. It knows that we are sojourners, travellers on a journey to an eternal city – here is no place of stay. It has to witness to the world. This means that it has to speak to the world about God. There is a lot of stuff written about 'enculturation'. This means that we must speak to the community in a way it can understand. It does not mean we must bless the decadent culture. That is not the task of the Church. The worshipping community constantly intercedes for the world. It understands the inevitable justice of God and longs for others to know His amazing mercy. In its prayer and in its action it witnesses to this truth.

The worshipping community should be known for its holiness, its faithfulness and its absolute trust in God. Can we, like Abraham, mere 'dust and ashes', come before God and speak with confidence to the Father? Can we understand what Jesus teaches us about the goodness of God and His generosity and share that with others every day?

We are the ones who know that the survival and salvation of the world depend on the mercy of God. We live in a culture that no longer knows that truth. How can they know if we do not tell them?

In the end Sodom was destroyed. The final straw was the vicious persecution of the faithful and their flight. The men of Sodom had demanded that the faithful approve, collaborate with and participate in their sinful ways. This the faithful could not and cannot do.

With the departure of the last of the just there were no longer TEN left. While the rest of the country is beating each other up over whether we will survive inside or outside the EU, we, as the community of Faith, need to remind people that, unless we turn back to God, the future of our nation, our continent and our civilisation is bleak.

With Abraham and Rabbi Meir, with Jesus and the Holy Father we need to call people back to the Faith of our fathers. No compromises, no watering it down. We need to 'do what it says on the tin'.