



HOMILY by Father Robbie Low

#### **4th Sunday of Advent - Year A**

##### ***In your dreams***

*Readings: Isaiah 35: 1-6, 10, Ps 145, James 5: 7-10, Matthew 11: 2-11*

Last summer I was on the beach with the family. A well upholstered lady in her fifties passed me wearing a T-shirt with a slogan on it. Assuming she wished her self- advertisement to be read, I put on my spectacles and gazed at her amidships. The legend across her embonpoint read simply, 'IN YOUR DREAMS'.

In the split second between registering the message and getting an unnecessarily frosty glare from its wearer I wasn't sure whether this was an exercise in self-deprecating irony or a serious breach of the Trades Descriptions Act. Either way it was light years from my experience of the night-time journeys in which my unconscious is usually involved.

The area of dream is all too often reduced to meaning a favourite fantasy – the dream man/woman, the dream house, the dream kitchen, the dream job etc. Little or no attention is paid to the actual world of dream and this is a pity. Indeed many people claim they do not dream at all. Though untrue it indicates, at the very least, that few recall the content of their night-time odysseys.

I always dream and I only wish that I had kept a journal down the years of the many fascinating and informative adventures that have befallen me. Dream is the place, for example, where dead friends often return to me and we spend a brief while in each other's company again. It is also a place where the territorial, geographical and even scientific physical limitations are bypassed to lead us into unexplored realms. By day we keep a tight rein on our consciousness. By night sleep liberates us to hear and see beyond the normal limitations of the daily round, the known world.

Dream plays a vital role in some religious consciousness and in the communication of God with Man. So it is in the remarkable stories of Joseph, the great Old Testament dreamer, and his later namesake, the gentle guardian of Jesus and husband of Our Lady, Mary.

In today's Gospel the very life of Christ and the whole Gospel project, the gift of salvation, hangs in the loop of dreams. Mary has told Joseph that she is with child – by God Himself. Joseph, as the apparently cuckolded fiancé of an, at best, deluded or, at worst, deceitful and insane woman has limited options. The primary choice is to expose Mary as a loose woman and blasphemer and demand the full punishment of the Law – death by stoning. The supposed illegitimate fruit of her womb would perish with her. Problem solved. Honour retained. A bitterly disappointed man would be thus vindicated in society.

The alternative and gentler way was the quiet 'divorce' – the ending of the engagement without publicity or fuss and sending her off to the country for the family to deal with the problem without local scandal. It was this solution that the broken-hearted Joseph chose. Until.....

You will recall that John the Baptist's father was granted a full angelic audience while on duty at the Altar of Incense in the Temple, in order to prepare him for the coming of his prophet son.

Mary herself was the object of the great Archangelic visitation we call the Annunciation to prepare her for her task as Mother of God.

Later the humble shepherds in the Bethlehem fields would witness a sky full of the angelic host announcing the birth of the Saviour of the world and commissioning the humble workmen to spreading the Good News of Jesus.

For Joseph he has to rely on dream. Yet for him this is no less real. The appearance of the angel to him in dream is just as convincing as waking reality. For the Israelite he could look back on a great tradition of holy dreamers and angelic interventions from Abraham, Jacob, Samuel, Solomon, Daniel etc.

The world of the ancients, the culture of our forefathers, understood that sometimes God bypassed the tight self-congratulatory day-time rationality of our limited human intelligence to impart things of much greater import than we could normally conceive. (To an age which nightly entertains itself with pictures materialising out of thin air this should not seem so improbable). On the strength of this night-time encounter with God's messenger, Joseph understands his duty, appreciates anew the truth and beauty of Mary, reconciles himself to the mockery his faithfulness will engender, commits himself to the guardianship of the Christ child. It is one of the greatest and most significant acts of faith in the history of salvation. Without his compassion the baby Jesus would not have been born.

Without his obedience Mary would have been cut adrift. And later, when the angel came again to warn him of a homicidal Herod, without his spiritual alertness, the baby Jesus would have been lost in the Massacre of the Innocents. This Sunday is usually most about Mary but we should never lose sight of her faithful loving husband, guardian of Jesus.

It is also a reminder to all the faithful that 'in your dreams' should not be a synonym for unrealistic fantasy or a term of dismissal but a reminder that God can only speak to us when we are free to listen. That might be deep in conscious prayer or it might be in the night season when the tight rein of consciousness allows the soul a little space and freedom to entertain the great things of God

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