



HOMILY by Father Robbie Low

3rd Sunday of Lent-Year C-March 24th 2019

Readings: Exodus 3: 1-8 13-15, Psalm 102, 1 Corinthians 10: 1-6 10-12,

Luke 13: 1-9

Wandering through the streets of Rome last September I was taken aback to find myself in front of an immaculate shop, looking for all the world like a pharmacy, whose sole product was cannabis sativa and its derivatives. The medicinal properties of this popular plant have now apparently persuaded the authorities to cease prosecuting those who choose to 'self-medicate'.

This is all a far cry from the heady days of the 1960s when the youth culture was fuelled by a wide variety of recreational dopes that variously altered moods, inhibited motivation, destroyed articulacy and led, long term, to a paranoia and consequent mental health issues. Today the drug culture is normative and the only controversy is whether to nationalise it and regulate it or continue the battle against the vicious criminal gangs that deal in its misery.

I start here because the 1960s, among its other heresies, saw the production of quasi mystical writings that claimed religious experience as a result of the ingestion of industrial quantities of alkaloids. Third eyes were opened, mystic visions encountered, transcendental flights were

guaranteed via mushrooms, pills and weed. To any impartial observer this excitement may have gone unnoticed, confronted, as they usually were, not by a room of animated mystics but by a sordid squat of the semi-comatose, brain altered, unfit for work and heading for diminished capacity and damaged intellect. So compelling was the narrative that quite serious players became confused. The leading authority on the Dead Sea Scrolls signed off with the theory that Christianity was a fertility cult inspired by hallucinogenic mushrooms. (I think something was lost in translation). Tibetan monks could bi-locate at the whiff of a joss stick (the monk in question turned out to be an imaginative plumber from Plympton) Rastafarians, that mixture of Ethiopian nationalism, dope and black underclass re-identification, identified the Burning Bush as Cannabis and Moses' subsequent experiences as a drug fuelled extravaganza. A Jewish professor thinks it's the dimethyltryptamine in acacia trees that is responsible for most of the desert prophets. You couldn't make it up – though somebody clearly has.

As a regular drug user – my life revolves around the rattle of pill pots – chemicals supplying the missing, provoking the inert, steadying the damaged control panel, rallying the dying brain around the flag of consciousness – I am well aware of the infinite complexities of the neural response. What makes today's encounter in the desert – Moses before the bush of fire - stand out from the fantastic and the fanciful is that it is true and its veracity has been validated by the overwhelming historical experience of Man.

This moment in religious history is truly determinative for in it the true and eternal identity of God is revealed. For the Jew the eternal flame of the altar of worship is foretold and also that, in being afire but not

consumed, Israel will survive her centuries in the furnace of suffering but not be destroyed.

For the Muslim this revelation simply marks out the call of Moses.

For the Orthodox Christian this is a moment of encounter with the uncreated energies of God – His Glory – usually hidden but now revealed as blazing light. Like the Seraphim – literally ‘the burning ones’ who attend God – the bush is ablaze with the divine mystery of creative love and power, not destruction.

For the Catholic Christian there is all this plus an ikon of the Blessed Virgin as the Burning Bush, the Godbearer, to whom the divine power comes and dwells and radiates to all mankind and throughout time but with no harm to this sacred bearer of the holy fire.

What is revealed to Moses is the very essence of God. Yes God is the god of the ancestors – He is the one who has revealed Himself to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob - but now comes the great revelation. He alone is God. He is God alone. He is the fountainhead. He is the I AM – the first person singular of the verb ‘to be’, the origin and end of all things, the very BEING without which ‘being’ is not.

From this astonishing moment in a desert byway comes the beginning of the understanding of the divine, the long educational journey of the heart of Man into the things eternal. Here, shoeless and face covered for fear in the awe of the Presence, the servant of God hears his call which change the history of Man. He is taken into the confidence of the Almighty and commissioned to his task of liberating the slaves of Pharaoh, the slaves of paganism and sin and making them a people and leading them home to the Land of Promise.

From this moment the great Judeo- Christian culture begins to unfold in history. The law, the art, the science, the theology, the anthropology, the self- understanding of the essential humanity of Man, the sudden

explosion of the little local definition of gods into the cosmic reality of the One True Universal God. Here, before the bush of fire, we hear the divine name. Here in this desert place we witness the origin of the tongues of flame that will encircle and crown the Apostles at the Pentecost and hover over the fonts and altars of Christendom Here, kneeling, barefoot suppliants we see the same glory that will illuminate the sky from the Bethlehem stable. Here we first apprehend the words that the Word made flesh will proclaim in the Garden of Gethsemane – ‘I AM HE’

The fire proclaims the all- consuming power of God’s love for Man, the energy of the eternal, the light of the divine wisdom, the glory of God. It is with this fire that all disciples must pray to be ablaze