



HOMILY by Father Robbie Low

28<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time-Year C-October 13<sup>th</sup> 2019

***Readings: 2 Kings 5: 14-17, Psalm 97, 2 Timothy 2: 8-13,***

***Luke 17: 11-19***

Just off the Corso in Rome, behind the glorious palace and museum of the Doria Pamphilj, down the stairs beneath the church of Santa Maria Via Lata, is a complex of rooms where the great teacher of the Faith, St. Paul, spent his years of house arrest in the capital of empire, awaiting trial. For most of the pilgrims that I have travelled with, this has been the key moment of their journey. The basilicas are great but here, in this house like any other, is a tangible link to the life of the man who speaks to us most passionately about Jesus.

Cut across the city now and out into the suburbs – to the extraordinary self-proclamatory grandeur of the fascist architecture of Mussolini's EUR. Up along the main street and out on the highway and its bustle is a sudden turn back on yourself. Down a little slope, around a tree-lined corner and you are into the Abbey of the Three Fountains (Tre Fontane). Here is the great monastery church. To enter is to be invited into deep prayer and the profound silence of the Trappist order that lives and works there. Along from this is a set of steps leading down to a tiny chapel. The chapel was once the single cell prison that held Paul on the night before his execution. To kneel and pray there is an immense privilege. Across the garden is the Church of the Three Fountains Here is the very spot

where St. Paul was beheaded – that peculiar privilege granted to a Roman citizen (in contrast to the crucifixion of Peter.) Where the head of the Apostle rolled the three fountains sprang – symbols of the Trinitarian witness and the water of life.

Few places take you closer to the life of the early church, the cost of witness and the sacrifice of martyrdom. It is a martyrdom that continues for on the wall outside the monastery church are the photographs of the seven Trappist monks of the Tibhirine monastery in Algeria kidnapped, twenty years ago, and murdered by an Islamic group. Beheaded like Paul. For all its bucolic otherness then, in Tre Fontane we are in front line territory.

I offer this background, not as a kind of post-holiday spiritual travelogue but because it was here that this morning's letter to Timothy was written. It is Paul's final correspondence before his execution. Its contents then have a resonance all their own.

We are companions of his final hours.

We are with him in his cell awaiting the dispensation of state injustice. Like most of the condemned, like most of those facing their own dying, Paul is steadfastly preparing for his mortal end – but planning for the future. He is girding himself for the martyrdom that may embrace him any hour. He is organising the next few months if he is spared. In his final words we see just how few people have, when the going gets tough, are prepared to stand beside him. We get a wonderful glimpse into his friendships. We know about the loyalty of St. Luke – there to the end. We are thrilled to find that his reconciliation with Mark- the young, timid, fellow evangelist whose callow wimpishness so annoyed Paul that he fell out with lovely Barnabas. Mark- now reliable and courageous – is asked to bring Paul's cloak AND THOSE MANUSCRIPTS – especially the parchments. We can only imagine what these precious writings may have been. Greetings to his old friends, the catechists Prisca and Aquila, from Acts 18 and messages from, amongst others, Linus – the man who will

succeed St. Peter as Bishop of Rome – the second Pope who would take on the care and governance of the universal church in the wake of the terrifying Neronian persecutions and the chaos of the year of the four emperors.

It is a tumultuous time and Paul is handing on the leadership to the next generation. The letter is intensely pastoral in its concerns. It reaffirms the orthodox teaching of the Faith. It underscores Paul's confidence in the Resurrection hope in the face of imminent death.

He exhorts Timothy to be a 'good soldier' of Jesus Christ - a reminder of the spiritual warfare in which Christians are inevitably engaged.

He compares the work of the church leader to a good farmer – ploughing, sowing, watering, protecting, reaping with the spiritual equivalents.

He counsels against endless unproductive chatter, idle philosophical speculation – what I would call 'pub religion' – a few pints down and every man is a theologian who knows better than the priest.

He encourages kindness, gentle correction – space to allow repentance, patience and good teaching.

He warns against a time when Christians will reject good teaching and choose teachers that collaborate 'with their own lusts'. These phonies who tell people what they want to hear Paul dismisses with the delightful name of 'ear ticklers'.

Just before the final personal greetings Paul writes this:

'For I am already on the point of being sacrificed; the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that Day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing'

Kneeling here in our parish churches or kneeling in the cell of the martyr at Tre Fontane or in the chapel of his execution, let us make that our resolve – to fight the good fight – and be among those who have loved

the appearing of the Christ and who live between Heaven and Earth,  
faithful while mortal life obtains, longing to be with Him in glory.