



HOMILY by Father Robbie Low

30th Sunday in Ordinary Time-Year C-27th October 2019

Readings: Ecclesiasticus 35: 12-14, 16-19, Psalm 33, Timothy 4: 6-8, 16-18, Luke 19: 9-14

Fifteen years ago Sara and I quietly converted to the Catholic Church. After seven years keeping my head down and enjoying the glorious liberty of the laity, I was ambushed by my spiritual director, my parish priest and by the constant encouragement of the people here, to present myself to Bishop Christopher for consideration for ordination. So it was that, to quote our much loved and lamented friend, John Hilton, this ‘old Anglican re-tread’ shipped up on the episcopal carpet at Plymouth. As I spoke of the deepest things of the heart Bishop Christopher, quite insensitively, busied himself riffling through his filing cabinet. This did not augur well. Finally, when I had finished, he sat down, having apparently retrieved the mystery piece of paper for which he had been distractedly searching and paid me some attention.

He leant forward and handing me the elusive sheet.

‘This’, he said, ‘is a list of the documents you will need for Rome.’

‘Does that mean, father, that you are prepared to ordain me?’

‘Obviously I will run you past some senior priests but I think I know enough about you to proceed.’

A year later, diaconate fulfilled, papers in order, Bishop Christopher gave me my ordination date – 27th October. At first glance nobody’s feast but

then, on closer examination, a piece of great episcopal humour. The day belongs to St. Otteran – a sixth century follower of St. Aidan and buried on Iona. So far so good. Unfortunately he is best known from an apocryphal tale in which, post mortem, his head arises from the grave and says some outrageous things – so much so that the monks shovelled earth into his mouth to stop him. This gave rise to the phrase, ‘Put mud in the gob of St. Otteran’ to be applied to anyone who says uncomfortable things. A provocative talking head – I cannot imagine why Bishop Christopher alighted on this obscure celebration.

The wonderful upshot for me was that seven years ago, on this very day, I lay here, face to the carpet, as the great litany of the saints washed over me – it is difficult to put into words just what a sense of their presence you feel at that moment and how profoundly you know yourself surrounded by the prayers of the entire Christian family, earth, Heaven and the Purification. And how much you depend on them as you lie, all surrendered and utterly inadequate, before the mercy seat of God and at the feet of His Apostle.

And how much you depend on them still.

I am very grateful to Fr. Ciaran for letting me offer the Mass here today. He has been an unfailingly generous boss and colleague whose forty two years of service, much of it in some of the most difficult places on earth, puts my little offering in perspective. And I am grateful to the other priests who, serving here, have encouraged me. Fr. Guy with his immense intellect who immediately encouraged me and used me. Fr. Keith, whose sharp stick and pastoral example was never far from me. Fr. George, my spiritual director, who finally insisted on my offering myself. Each, in their own way, have aided the journey. Most of all I am grateful to my family and to this congregation whose encouragement and support and prayers have been determinative.

That is the context in which I approach this morning’s Gospel.

Two men come to the Temple to pray. The professional religious and the

‘bum’. I know that I am not as other men are – in one sense only. I am a priest and therefore more is expected of me. I am responsible before God and answerable to Him for my care of you and for fearlessly telling the truth.

In every other respect I am like the ‘bum’. If I do not know that I am a sinner I cannot sit in the confessional and accompany the souls of my fellow pilgrims to the foot of the Cross and unburden and be reconciled and walk out freed and rejoicing in God’s love and mercy. I always finish a confession with the words,

‘Go in peace and pray for me a sinner.’ – not out of some bogus piety but because it is true and we both need to be reminded of that.

Unless I echo the ‘bum’ – God have mercy on me, a sinner – I cannot approach the altar and dare to invoke the Holy Spirit of God to transform the elements of Bread and Wine into the most precious Body and Blood of Christ. This is only possible because, as the vestments remind us – I am baptised. I put on the righteousness of Christ over the ‘filthy rags’ (as St. Paul calls them) of my own ‘righteousness’. I am held together by the girdle of truth. I am His servant under the yolk of the stole of authority and service and then covered with the seamless robe of Christ, the unity in faith and doctrine of the Universal Church.

Because of His grace alone I can dare to be here at the Calvary, here where the dynamic power of God is at its glorious and terrifying and transcendent work. Because of His grace alone I can raise the Chalice of Salvation and bear the dazzling sight of His Transfiguration. From time to time it is good for the soul to lay out this frail mortal body face down on the carpet and be reminded of how all things must be surrendered, how utterly dependent we are on His mercy and how beautiful are the prayers of the Universal Church and the whole company of Heaven as we endeavour to go about Christ’s work on earth and how much we depend on the love and support of our fellow pilgrims – that would be you.

For what has been – I thank God.

For what is – I praise God.

For what will be – it's carpet time again