



HOMILY by Father Robbie Low

3rd Sunday of Advent-Year A-December 15th 2019

Readings: Isaiah 35:1-6, 10, Psalm 145, James 5: 7-10,

Matthew 11: 2-11

One thing that forty years in ministry has taught me is ‘the extraordinary courage of ordinary people.’ Generally, in our assessment of bravery, we look for acts of ‘derring-do’ and very public heroism in order to define courage. Courage, of course, comes in all shapes and sizes. A few days ago, we witnessed ordinary people, confronted by a berserk convict, suddenly launching into him, defending life at a huge risk to their own. Remember no-one, at that point, knew that his ‘suicide vest’ was a sham. Certainly, his knife was real enough.

None of us know how we would react in similar circumstances. Would our instincts or adrenalin lead us to ‘fight or flight’?

This is instant bravery. The unexpected draws an unexpected response.

The hero or heroine reacts, often to their own surprise, instinctively.

There is no time to reflect or calculate – only the immediate gut reaction to threat, to danger, to injustice, to cruelty.

Other forms of courage come more in the mode of the long slow burn of testing. The priest and Eucharistic ministers are daily witnesses to the quiet and humbling courage of the long-term sick and their families.

Faced with the daily struggle with infirmity and mortality, their sheer determination, faithfulness and quiet decency flies in the face of the

torturing and demeaning reality. As the body diminishes, the soul grows in holiness, self-denial and dependence on Christ – identification with the Cross. To accompany such courage is to enter the intensity of the soul, stripping down before God.

Here is no sudden uplifting burst of adrenalin, the response to the instant threat. Here is just the daily battle with odds we know, in the end, we will not beat but are determined to carry our little flag of faithfulness in hope and love and trust. Why, today, talk about courage?

Today we find John the Baptist in prison. He has, whether he suspects it or not, come to the end of his ministry and, very nearly, to the end of his life. There is no doubt of his physical courage. He rejected the potential comfort of an ‘inside track’ clergy career courtesy of his dad’s priesthood and the enormous expectations that surrounded the miracle child. He took to the tyrannical harshness of the desert, to be alone with God, to be dependent on the Word, to be utterly responsive to the Call. Physically, he is a tough guy.

His ministry is a huge and unlikely public triumph. He does what clergy, not least those in leadership, fear to do – call the nation to repentance. To dare to suggest that something is wrong – not just with ‘them’ but with YOU. That only a return to God will turn the ship around and avoid disaster. In this enterprise John takes on the whole compromised structure of religious authority and, for the time being, they can only watch in horror as this great wind from the desert blows across the land.

John fearlessly criticises the monarchical establishment. More significantly he calls out a ruthless and determined woman. The king is committing adultery with his brother’s wife. He knew the risks, but can he have fully assessed the consequences? John would not have seen it in those terms. He had to speak God’s Word and if that meant criticising the head honcho and his ménage, so be it. Imprisoned, this spiritual whirlwind has plenty of time to reflect and it is here that, paradoxically,

you and I may find the greatest encouragement. John is no longer driven by the sheer force of survival required to endure the desert and the wilderness. That, in retrospect, is relatively easy. John is no longer fuelled by the adrenalin hit of the great crowds and the bruising soapbox encounters with those leading the nation astray.

He is alone – in a cell – on Death Row. Like all prisoners he has plenty of time to think, to reflect, to reprise the history and decisions that led him here – to the last stop on the road to death.

The One who first acknowledged the Messiah, by leaping in his mother's womb, now asks the question.

The one who pointed out Jesus on the Jordan bank and identified Him with the Passover sacrifice now, in the darkness of alone, seeks confirmation. In this unlooked-for extremis, in the prime of his life and on the threshold of his death, John longs for reassurance.

‘Are you the One who is to come? Or do we look for another?’

John's whole ministry has been predicated on preparing the way for the Lord. From the isolation and darkness of prison, he asks the question. Is it true or has my entire life been in vain?

These are not the questions of a coward. He no less believes in God. He no less believes in the coming Saviour. But he sees his own ministry now called into question by events or, as he sees it, the lack of them. It is a frank and potentially brutal analysis of his own situation. This seems an odd way to end a heroic life, yet in this darkness we may ourselves be reassured. We remembered the great prophet Elijah whose triumphs over the pagans are legendary but whose ministry failed to turn the tide. Elijah sits, exiled in the desert, in fear of his life and asks God to let him die. His ministry, he fears, has ended in failure. He sees himself as the only one left. He is utterly depressed. But God has not finished with him.

These are heroes on the cutting edge of dangerous ministry crying out to God.

It will be echoed by Jesus Himself in His cry from the Cross, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'. That is not the cry of an atheist. It is not wrong to want comfort. It is not wrong to ask the question. It is not wrong, as we walk through the valley of the shadow of death (or any other crisis) to confront the Lord with our anguish. It is the ultimate act of faith as we go 'heart to heart' with Him. The greatest of the saints have been there before us

In the darkest of nights, courage, my friends. We are in good company.