



HOMILY by Father Robbie Low

3rd Sunday in Ordinary Time-Year A-January 26th 2020

***Readings: Isaiah 8: 23-9: 3, Psalm 26, 1 Corinthians 1: 10-13,
Matthew 4: 12-23***

Last week my electronic mailbox delivered a note from my younger son containing an historical and theological document . As Paddy is an historian of the scaffold and the theatre of death, this is not unusual . The document was a copy of the last sermon of Dr. William Dodd, a close friend of the famous Dr. Johnson. It was the year after the Declaration of Independence of the American colonies and Dodd was not occupying a traditional pulpit. His address was given to his fellow convicts in Newgate Prison where he was awaiting execution for the crime of forgery. Dodd did not dispute the verdict or the sentence. He was known for his opulent living and was referred to as the ‘Macaroni Priest’ – an 18th century term for Dandyism.

Instead Dodd turned himself to a discourse on preparing his soul (and those of his fellow convicts) for the Great Assize. His theme is how we may be Faithful, Obedient and Repentant. By far the greater portion of his moving self-examination is giving over to repentance. There is even a note of gratitude for the opportunity. He is aware that he can do this fully and comprehensively in the shadow of death but not in the usual condition of sickness and frailty and confusion that often accompanies the final days of man.

In his prioritising of repentance, of course, Dodd is merely echoing the Gospel mandate of Christ Jesus Himself. In today's reading from Matthew, it is a telling mark of our age that we are offered a truncated version which completely eliminates the link fulfilling the Old Testament prophecy and squeezes out the vital information that Jesus began His ministry by calling for REPENTANCE.

Repentance emerges in sorrow for sin and shows its fruit in amendment of life. It is the first step on the road home. It is an acknowledgement of reality and a determination, by God's grace, to be re-formed into the divine image in which He created us. It is a painful process but one that ends in joy and liberation.

I often jest that 'Sin was abolished in 1962', because the philosophical zeitgeist (and to a large extent the ecclesiastical one) changed in that momentous decade from this recognition of the disabling and alienating power of sin and the need for the Atonement of the Christ's Sacrifice. In its place was a rejection of the guilt that accompanies that recognition and the replacement of justification by faith with the psychobabble of self-justification. The Cross was redundant. Good works were the new salvation.

Guilt, of course, can be crippling and there was much unhealthy wallowing in it. The point about guilt is that it is a symptom that something is wrong. It is not an end in itself but a provocation to seek a cure. Having come to terms with the pathology of the soul, the sinner can avail himself of the medicine of immortality in the Sacraments - a remedy highly commended by the imminently mortal Dr. Dodd. Far from being a terminally miserable process, repentance - beginning in sorrow and painful recognition - ends in triumph, redemption and joy because of the Cross of Jesus.

This is primarily a personal process. I cannot repent for somebody else. But as the Church, above and beyond our personal *metanoia*, our reconciliation with the Father, we have a duty to call others to this

journey of freedom and salvation. This means that we have to witness this in our personal and communal lives. Put shortly, the Church has an historic and unending task to call the nation to repentance – because she wants the best for all her people.

But this requires that the Church herself be a transparently penitent body. We have to be very obviously a forgiven and forgiving people.

If we are to call others, we must exhibit the signs of that engagement with the reality of who we are, the encounter with the Cross and the joy of liberation and restoration. Jesus begins the Gospel by preaching repentance. We would be well advised to pay heed to Our Lord's priority for the salvation of Man.