



HOMILY by Father Robbie Low

3rd Sunday of Lent-Year B-March 7th 2021

***Readings: Exodus 20: 1-17, Psalm 18, 1 Corinthians 1: 22-25,
John 2: 13-25***

If, like me, you are a fan of the playwright, humourist and great observer of human nature, Alan Bennett, you may, if you are long in the tooth, recall the springboard to fame of this unlikely gentle Yorkshire voice and young oxford medievalist. Bennett is, at 86, the only surviving member of the original 'Beyond the Fringe' revue which, in 1960, took the London theatre by storm.

(Peter Cook, Dudley Moore and Jonathan Miller were the others).

Bennett's contributions, inter alia, numbered a memorable impersonation of the worst sort of clergyman, complete with parsonical voice, giving an incoherent, cliched and directionless address to the assembled sufferers in his congregation.

Two moments remain indelibly etched in my memory from hearing it some 60 years ago.

Bennett begins, 'As I was on my way here tonight, I found myself at the station going out of the way marked 'IN'. 'Hey Jack,' an employee of the railway company hailed me, or words to that effect, 'Where do you think

you are going?'. Words that we might do very much worse than to ponder here today.

Where do you think you are going?'

Later, in another monstrous non-sequitur, he declaims, apropos of nothing in particular:

'You know, life is like a tin of sardines, we're all of us looking for the key.....and when we've found it and opened the sardine can of life.....you know there's always a little bit left in the corner that you can't get out. Is there a little bit in the corner of your life? I know there is in mine.'

Enough of the immortal Alan.

I revive him because it seems to me that for all the hilarious absurdity of the piece there are a couple of substantial pointers behind the parody.

Lent is a time for reviewing the journey. Where do we think we are going? And, while life is decidedly not a tin of sardines, there is often, in our penitential wrestling, bits of stuff that we seem unable to access or shift.

In today's Gospel, Jesus takes a whip to the Temple traders. They are occupying holy space with their bogus lumber, defrauding the worshippers, putting their interests before the interests of the divine, getting in the way of true worship. They tell the lie that the way in to God is guarded by their monopoly and their 'mark up'.

Of course the message is much deeper than the historical event. Later in Holy Scripture we are advised that WE, as the baptised, are temples of the Holy Spirit, the place where God is worshipped. And, if we are honest, sometimes that Temple is full of lumber, junk, impedimenta, the sheer burden of stuff and nonsense, sin and unsorted baggage that stop

us making the journey, dim the lamp of the sanctuary, obscure the Presence – not only for ourselves but for those who might look to us to see something of the divine reflection. Grubby mirrors that need cleaning and resilvering by absolution and grace.

Lent is a time for cleansing the temple. In olden days we might have given ourselves a sharp remind, not only by fasting but by mortification of the flesh. Flagellant processions are no longer the order of the day. But this Gospel story reminds us that Our Lord is not averse to handing out a short, sharp shock when the Temple is profaned. We may embrace the discipline and get on with the clearance – like the reluctant hoarders on that awful programme, trapped in their attachments until there is no room left in their homes to live. We may, like the Temple traders, deeply resent Our Lord's invasion of our comfortable mess and insuperable lumber and obsessive preoccupations with the world of matter. In which case we may be found, at the end of that selfsame week, shouting at Pilate and demanding, 'Crucify Him'.

Lent is a time of desert, time of cleansing, time of renewal, time of decision.

To bowdlerise the Revd Alan, 'Hey Jack, where do you think you're going. Time to clean out the sardine tin.'

Time to cleanse the temple of the soul and rekindle on the altar of our hearts the fire of love for God.