



HOMILY by Father Robbie Low

5th Sunday of Easter-Year B-May 2nd 2021

Readings: Acts 9: 26-31, Psalm 21, 1 John 3: 18-24, John 15: 1-8

A couple of weeks ago I got an email from a man I met several years ago on a snow covered plateau in the Pyrenees. We were part of the HCPT pilgrimage groups and Mike was from the Bristol pack. We did what all self-respecting Englishmen do when they meet outdoors in unpromising circumstances. We put down some jumpers and had a game of football. I remember Mike for two reasons. One is that, at the end of the game which we tragically lost, he told me he was marrying later that year and I offered to say Mass for him and his bride on that day. The second is that I still have the bruises from the fouls he committed on me in that game. We have kept in touch ever since. Cut to the chase..... Mike now works in Zurich and invited me, in these strange but opportunistic times, to his ZOOM Bible Study group. They are bravely tackling St. Paul's letter to the Romans. I gave my input on one aspect and the questions came thick and fast – a real hunger for God's Word and continual delight and surprise at its revelations. Of course you won't find bigger fans of the great missionary Apostle than Fr. Guy and me and hence our website rejoices in the name ST PAUL REPOSITORY.

That is not to say that we don't recognise that St. Paul was not the easiest guy to live with. He wasn't. I always love being reminded of this

by the little reading from the Acts of the Apostles that we just heard today.

The great persecutor of the Church of God has been converted, blinded of the light of the world and receiving direct aural communication with the Risen One on the road to the most ancient city of Damascus. He has been baptised. He has gone off to make sense of this extraordinary revelation in the context of all he has ever known as a faithful Jew, a devout Pharisee, a seeker of the holiness of God.

Paul has already caused uproar in Damascus. Now he arrives in Jerusalem. Not everyone trusts him. Could he be a Trojan horse? An Agent Provocateur? Things had calmed down since Stephen's martyrdom. No-one wanted to go back to that appalling persecution. Enter good old Joseph Barnabas, the Son of Encouragement, the Levite from Cyprus whose donation of his lands helped fund the earliest church. Barnabas sees the truth of Paul and the spiritual reality of his conversion and 'takes charge of him' – insofar as anyone takes charge of this huge history changing character. He explains to the Apostles and they cautiously accept his testimony. Paul briefly accompanies them. BUT..... it is not a moment before Paul is engaged in a mighty ruck with the 'Hellenists' – about what we are not vouchsafed. But it's enough to set plots running to kill him. Quite understandably the Apostles do not need this. Paul is unceremoniously bundled off to Caesarea and given his ticket home to Tarsus where he will wait years to be re-summoned to the Apostolic Ministry and the Gentile Mission. Again it will be good old Barnabas who digs him out, dusts him down and starts him on the road to immortality. It is worth remembering that the Acts of the Apostles is written by Paul's great friend, follower and companion, St. Luke, so the next sentence gives you an idea of the whirlwind that always accompanies Paul and Luke's sense of humour. On Paul's enforced

departure, Luke comments drily, 'And so the churches in Judaea, Samaria and the Galilee were left in peace'. It's Luke's way of saying that he knows that his hero and his great buddy could cause a fight in an empty room.

This will not be the last confrontation involving what the old missal calls, 'The Teacher of the World' Apart from the endless rows in synagogues, market places, Areopagus. In spite of beatings, expulsions, imprisonments etc at the hands of fellow Jews and pagan authorities, there is more yet. This 'Johnny come lately' Apostle spectacularly falls out with his generous protector – the delightful Barnabas- Barnabas wants to give the 'drop-out' Mark another chance on the next mission. Paul has no time for 'mummy's boys' who can't take the pace. They argue and separate. It is an unedifying moment. (Barnabas is right. Mark turns out to be a now faithful servant who will eventually accompany Peter to Rome and martyrdom while recording his Gospel. Paul is right in that his mission is now undivided by personality and his leadership is clear – Barnabas and Paul became Paul and Barnabas and now PAUL.) Paul also faces down the first Pope. When St. Peter is backtracking on his post Joppa vision commitment to the inclusion of the Gentiles and retreating to separate tables and putting the Law before Grace, Paul takes him to task and corrects the Papacy on an issue that could have reduced the Universal Church to a breakaway Jewish cult. We all owe Paul much – indeed our very existence in some sense.

So what is the upshot of all this?

In the Canon of the Mass we ask that, in spite of our shortcomings, we may one day be in the company of the long list of great saints. There is for me always a slight frisson here. I really mean it but I am also conscious that, with all my little compromises and backsliding in this life,

I would have found them daunting companions. John the Baptist,
Stephen, Paul?

Yet, like you and the whole Church of God, I am profoundly grateful for those whose courage, commitment, single-mindedness, raw fidelity to God brooked no compromise and challenges me every day to do the same. Sometimes they may seem like 'the awkward squad' but, in reality, they are the 'Valiant for Truth'. Without them the long slide into comfortable compromise cedes the field of battle to the ever alert and regrouping forces of the dark.

Being difficult for its own sake is a sin and an unattractive and demeaning characteristic.

Being difficult for the sake of the Truth is a duty, a virtue and a privilege.