



HOMILY by Father Robbie Low

7th Sunday of Easter – Year B

The Unappointed

Readings: Acts 1: 15-17, Ps 103, 1 John 4: 11-16, John 17:11b-19

Thirty-five miles south west of Jerusalem, on the road to Gaza, in what is now a Jewish National Park, you will find the ruins of the ancient city of Eleutheropolis. Ok so it doesn't mean much to you. Indulge me a little.

In the first century of the Christian era it was known as Betaris (or Beth Gabra), according to the historian Josephus, which translates as 'The House of the Strong'.

During the Jewish War of 68-70 AD it suffered a terrible fate as the Roman armies 'cleaned up' the countryside and slaughtered some 10,000 inhabitants in the area and took the rest into slavery.

Sixty years later, during the Bar Kochba revolt, it received a similar pasting. Extraordinarily, by the year 200AD it had revived to become a city of some significance in the Roman scheme of governance of Palestine. Without a hint of irony the Roman destroyers and now builders, christened it ELEUTHEROPOLIS - THE CITY OF THE FREE.

By the time of the acceptance of Christianity as the religion of the Empire, Eleutheropolis was sending its own bishop to the great Council of Nicaea.

But let's wind back to Betaris for a moment.

Today's reading takes us into the Council of the Apostles and the vital task of replacing Judas Iscariot, the dead traitor.

The Apostles are clear that the holy number of twelve needs to be maintained – representing the Tribes of Israel. They are also clear that the replacement needed to be, from the 'subs bench', a man who knew Jesus and the whole story, a man who had been with them from the beginning.

Two candidates emerge - Matthias who was the eventual choice and a man called Joseph Justus Barsabbas. The decision was made, not by discernment or debate but by lot. A prayerful version of 'lucky dip' that saw the Almighty's hand in the arm's length decision.

By such random curiosities of providence is history determined.

We hear nothing more of the successful candidate in Holy Scripture. In tradition he is variously advertised as ministering in places as far apart as Georgia and Ethiopia, dying a martyr on the frontiers to dying in bed in Jerusalem.

But what of the man who had come so close to glory – Joseph, the righteous one, the Son of the Oath or Sacrament – as his name translates? Similarly – nada.

There is however no record of Joseph stamping his foot, sulking and

walking out at such a disappointing decision.

There is no 'Joseph party' trying to correct the perceived injustice.

(I thought of this a few weeks back when a well-known dignitary in the national church retired from one of the loveliest jobs the establishment had to offer – bitter that he had never been made a bishop!)

All we may know of the faithful servant of God, Joseph Justus Barsabbas is the tradition that he never left the Holy Land but became the priest of the community of Betaris, the much later Eleutheropolis, ministering to the fledgling Christian congregation there as its pastor and then bishop until all were swept away in the tide of war and revenge unleashed by the Emperor Vespasian and subsequently his son, Titus.

Content to serve, uncomplainingly, where he was put, Joseph, like the great Josephs before him, just got on with the job, prepared to play his part in the great work of salvation, whatever the cost – in his case, martyrdom. A humble and telling example to all of us.

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