



HOMILY by Father Robbie Low

22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time-Year B-August 29th 2021

Readings: Deuteronomy 4: 1-2.6-8, Psalm 14, James 1: 17-18. 21-22. 27, Mark 7: 1-8.14-15. 21-23.

‘A man who is a hearer of the Word and not a doer is like a man who looks at himself in the mirror and goes away and forgets what he looks like.’

When people, out of kindness or courtesy, ask me how I am, I have cut the responses to two extreme monosyllabic alternatives – I reply either ‘TERRIFIC’ or ‘TERRIBLE’. Both are manifestly untrue but generally deter the well-meaning enquirer from tempting me into that self-pitying mantra listing the regiment of physical oppressors that, long-mustered on the borders, have now invaded the inadequate defences of age.

If they do press on with, ‘You’re looking good considering....’ - the ‘considering’ being shorthand for ‘considering the state you’re in’, I have a fall-back response. ‘It’s the drugs and the make-up’, I josh, which at least has the merit of being half-true. To those whom I snobbishly assume might have read Oscar Wilde’s little riff on decay, I might add, ‘You should see the portrait in the attic’.

Of course the truth varies from day to day but always begins with the dawn shock and vague disappointment at encountering an elderly, pouchy and unshaven mug in the bathroom mirror. This person has the temerity

to be masquerading as me. But as I have just a moment ago returned from the land of dreams wherein I was a dashing thirty-five year in the midst of hair-raising adventures with, I now realise, long dead friends or a rangy eighteen year old loping through summer fields to the echo of laughter, this is a deeply unwelcome awakening.

The bathroom mirror is, of course, the grim reality. But the other bits are still in there somewhere, part of the journey however distant now and obscured. Why all this personal detail? Well today's reading from the Letter of James contains the intriguing picture of our potential for foolishness, centred on our self-recognition. St. James tells us that a man who listens to God's Word and does not obey it, live it out, is like a man who observes himself in the bathroom mirror and promptly goes off and forgets what he looks like.

It's James' way of reminding us that the spiritual journey always begins in true self-awareness, knowing who we really are. That is a long and costly process of unwrapping the layers of subterfuge and conceit and evasion with which we have chosen to present ourselves or defend ourselves against an often unforgiving world. But we do not need to do that with God. After all He knows every detail and loves us still, because of and in spite of the shabby charade of our public persona. That is what the Cross is about. He wants us to come to know ourselves – who we truly are. For it is only when we know who and where we are that we can be serious about the light of truth and the next step on the journey. The unkindness of the morning bathroom light is as nothing beside the glorious light of 'The Father of Lights' in whom 'there is no alteration or shadow of change'. The nearer we get to God, the clearer the picture becomes. It is why the great saints were ever more frequent in their use of the sacrament of confession. Hid deep in the outer circles of the divine pilgrimage, the distant thickets, the grubbiness is not so noticeable. The nearer the light, the more each stain or blemish shows up.

But this is not an exercise in self-loathing. It is a fundamental engagement with the ultimate reality, God Himself. And that is a journey of hope, of discipling, of repentance, reform, renewal and love. It is the ultimate and indeed eternal adventure.

C.S Lewis' greatest novel, an exploration of the journey of the soul, was called, 'Til we have faces'. It is the rewrite of the myth of Cupid and Psyche and takes its title from a line in the book, 'How can the gods meet us face to face until we have faces?'

We have to look in the mirror, not as an act of vanity or shame, but simple truth. And ask the question, 'Who am I?' and 'Where am I going?' To stand under the light of the Father, which lit the Transfiguration, and to seek to conform to His Word whose glory was revealed there – which James witnessed – is the great task in hand. St Augustine*, whose feast we have just celebrated wrote this: 'Urged to reflect upon myself, I entered under your guidance the innermost places of my being; but only because you had become my helper was I able to do so. I entered, then, and with the vision of my spirit, such as it was, I saw the incommutable light far above my spiritual ken and transcending my mind.' To know who you are is not an act of self-indulgence or idolatry. We would be fools indeed if we worshipped what we truly found. It is an engagement with truth, in the light of which we can make the journey. What we find when we make that honest encounter will engender two things. It will drive us to the fountainhead of faith, to be washed in the wonderful loving mercy of God in the Confessional.

And it will carry us rejoicing back to His Word, the eternal light which is Christ in thanksgiving and obedience to this incarnate roadmap of the soul. As we look in the mirror we will, I hope, see two things.

Firstly the child for whom Christ died, a bit shabby, bemerded with an embarrassment of sins, in need of cleansing and encouraging.

Second, to observe what the great Cornish evangelist, Billy Bray, saw

when he said, 'I may look like an ordinary man but I know that, in reality, I am a prince. I know this because, in Christ Jesus, I have become a Son of the King of Kings'

As St Paul says elsewhere:

Now I see through a glass darkly. (Literally: Now I see a riddle in a mirror) Then I shall see face to face. My knowledge now is imperfect.

Then I shall know as fully as I am known.' Heaven bound.....

What a prospect of glory to all who seek the Light and are faithful to the Word.

*(St Augustine:

Urged to reflect upon myself, I entered under your guidance the innermost places of my being; but only because you had become my helper was I able to do so. I entered, then, and with the vision of my spirit, such as it was, I saw the incommutable light far above my spiritual ken and transcending my mind: not this common light which every carnal eye can see, nor any light of the same order; but greater, as though this common light were shining much more powerfully, far more brightly, and so extensively as to fill the universe. The light I saw was not the common light at all, but something different, utterly different, from all those things. Nor was it higher than my mind in the sense that oil floats on water or the sky is above the earth; it was exalted because this very light made me, and I was below it because by it I was made. Anyone who knows truth knows this light.

O eternal Truth, true Love, and beloved Eternity, you are my God, and for you I sigh day and night. As I first began to know you, you lifted me up and showed me that, while that which I might see exists indeed, I was

not yet capable of seeing it. Your rays beamed intensely on me, beating back my feeble gaze, and I trembled with love and dread. I knew myself to be far away from you in a region of unlikeness, and I seemed to hear your voice from on high: “I am the food of the mature: grow, then, and you shall eat me. You will not change me into yourself like bodily food; but you will be changed into me”.

Accordingly I looked for a way to gain the strength I needed to enjoy you, but I did not find it until I embraced *the mediator between God and man, the man Christ Jesus, who is also God, supreme over all things and blessed for ever*. He called out, proclaiming *I am the Way and Truth and the Life*, nor had I known him as the food which, though I was not yet strong enough to eat it, he had mingled with our flesh, for *the Word became flesh* so that your Wisdom, through whom you created all things, might become for us the milk adapted to our infancy.

Late have I loved you, Beauty so ancient and so new, late have I loved you!

Lo, you were within,

but I outside, seeking there for you,

and upon the shapely things you have made

I rushed headlong – I, misshapen.

You were with me, but I was not with you.

They held me back far from you,

those things which would have no being,

were they not in you.

You called, shouted, broke through my deafness;

you flared, blazed, banished my blindness;

you lavished your fragrance, I gasped; and now I pant for you;

I tasted you, and now I hunger and thirst;

you touched me, and I burned for your peace.)