



HOMILY by Father Robbie Low

The Most Holy Trinity – Year C

Suffering and Salvation

Readings: Proverbs 8:22-31, Ps 8, Romans 5:1-5, John 16:12-15

‘Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through him we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in our hope of sharing the glory of God. More than that, we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit which has been given to us.’

This Trinity Sunday our mother the Church gives us this simple passage from St Paul’s great Letter to the Church in Rome. When it was written it was controversial in the foundational Jewish communities to which it ministered and expository to the Gentile converts on the significance of the Jewish people themselves in the history of salvation. Fifteen centuries later it was to become the battleground between the Universal Church and the destructive and divisive forces let loose by the heresiarch Martin Luther.

In this letter Paul, having encountered passionate and frequently violent resistance to the Gospel among his own people – of which he was initially an exemplary exponent, seeks to understand the transition that has occurred in the coming of the Messiah. The key, he understands, is not legalism – no-one can actually fulfil all the demands of the Law – but FAITH. It is faith that is the golden thread running through the lives of all those who have set out on the pilgrim way. It is, in the end, that precious relationship with God that assures us of our destiny rather than a tick box list of ritual or even righteousness. (As St Paul reminds us elsewhere, even our righteousness is as filthy rags compared with the righteousness of God. It is one of the reasons that a priest vests himself in an alb – the white garment – because he dare not approach the altar of God in his own righteousness but, in prayer and symbolically, needs to put on the righteousness of Christ.)

As you will recall, Luther perverts the meaning of Holy Scripture by adding a word to the text. ‘justified by faith ALONE’. He is trying to get away from the ‘good works will buy my way into Heaven’ syndrome. Unfortunately, by tinkering with God’s Word, he predictably unleashed a tide of error. For correction we need look no further than the Letter of James who, anticipating Lutheran nonsense, says that Faith without works is dead. (Luther understandably, hated James). And, in Christ Himself, we hear the repudiation of Luther’s empty claim. In Matthew 25 we hear Jesus declare the terrifying final judgement in which the sorting is done according to the Corporal Works of Mercy. What we say and what we do and who we are is all of a piece. It is called ‘integrity’.

Similarly, Holy Scripture cannot be ripped up into personally convenient

texts but operates, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, with absolute integrity and indissoluble unity.

One of the consequences of this historical detour and poisoned fruit of Luther's schismatic error is that it overshadows the passionate heart that Paul has for his own people, the Jews. (Luther, in contrast, was a hysterical anti-Semite). Evangelism is always born of a loving heart for God, a gratitude to Him for our salvation in Christ and a passion to rescue others from the Judgement. The task of a Christian heart is to be so aligned with the Sacred Heart of Jesus that we walk the Way of the Cross with Him for those we are called to love and serve in this life. To fail to evangelise is a declaration of fatal carelessness.

The other effect of Luther's catastrophic error is to divert our attention from this simple equation on suffering that Paul offers us. Paul, after all, knows more than most about suffering. We might pay attention, therefore, to what God says through him. Whether we are suffering in our bodies our souls, sickness, persecution, the failure to convert loved ones, we need to hear this. St Paul tells us that faith leads us to Jesus and into the grace of God. For this, indeed, we rejoice. But he goes onto say that we are also to rejoice in our sufferings. This is hard to read. We do not like suffering. But..... Suffering for the Faith, he tells us, leads to endurance. Endurance, fortitude, the ability to grind it out in tough situations, a firming up of our usually flabby resolve. There is nothing that can detach us from Christ. We will endure. Indeed suffering drives us deeper into the mystery of the Cross and therefore into the mystery of salvation.

That 'Endurance produces character'. It forms who we are and who, in Christ, we will be. We are not blown about by the gales of novelty or degraded culture or the current tides of history. We are set firm on the rock of Christ. We are crew on the Ark of Salvation which alone can weather the storm of judgement. The character produced by this endurance is to be the character of Christ Himself forming in us. And that character produces 'hope' – a hope that does not disappoint because it is grounded in the ultimate reality and eternity of God Himself. (One of the great signs of the Devil's work is the destruction of hope. It is always a symptom of his mischief.) Hope is not irrational escapism but the engine of our pilgrimage born of the evidence of Christ. Hope enables us to be a Eucharistic people – thankful rather than pedlars of bitter, complaining hopelessness that fuels the discontent of a materialist society.

In rejoicing in suffering we are not masochists who seek pain, nor fools who repeat fairy tales to anaesthetise ourselves to the reality of our lot. Rather we are apprentices of Christ, learning by the alchemy of His grace, through the testing cauldron of the Cross, to transmute the base metal of our suffering humanity into the pure gold of His redemption. 'Offer it up...' we used to say. Some of us still do.

It remains the way of victory and of our sure companionship with the saints in Heaven.

