



HOMILY by Father Robbie Low

29th Sunday in Ordinary Time-Year C-October 16th 2022

***Readings: Exodus 17: 8-13, Psalm 120, 2 Timothy 3: 14-4: 2,
Luke 18:1-8***

When the relics of St Therese of Lisieux, the Little Flower and Doctor of the Church, visited England over a decade ago, there was an audible sigh of incredulous exasperation from some of the Catholic hierarchy. Surely, after all the great modernising work of post-Conciliar times, there was not going to be a return to this sort of medieval superstition. The good thing was, of course, that nobody – except a few Trad nutters would come. Au contraire..... people came in huge numbers and, most alarmingly of all for the agnostic guardians of the modernising project, a large proportion of them were YOUNG PEOPLE – the very touchstone of ‘the project’. They were not supposed to respond to this kind of anachronism. Here, a decade or more on, we are welcoming the relics of St Bernadette, the simple heart of the great pilgrim shrine of Lourdes. Predictably, now, the same enthusiasm has accompanied this precious visit. Our group of young and older regular pilgrims spent weeks preparing and were incredibly excited. What on earth, the modernising rationalist will ask, is going on here? How can educated young people in a post-modernist age get excited about the bits of a dead peasant girl who had hallucinations about a woman in the greatest fairy story ever told? Well, it’s a bit more complicated than that. Let us charitably, for a

moment, assume that Bernadette Soubiros saw Our Lady. She wouldn't be the first or the last. Let us also, while in this fit of suspended disbelief, accept that there may be some historic reality to this legendary figure acknowledged and venerated by the two of the great monotheistic religions. If this was indeed the case we still need some justification for the veneration of the bits of the dead visionary.

In Christianity holiness is not some purely some hobby for the soul. It is not hived off into the merely realm marked 'spiritual'. It has consequences for the body. In Christianity the body has a great part to play. It is not simply the 'house of clay' employed as transport for the soul. Not, as in the ancient mind, just that sinful sack that degrades the loftier realms of the spirit and from which death alone will release us. In Christianity the body is a divine gift of the whole person, its point of common recognition and its continuity of persona. When God chose to participate in our humanity He did so by Incarnation – by enfleshment, by embodiment. Anything else would have been fraudulent – not the real deal. To simply *appear* as Man while remaining pure spirit is the heresy of Docetism. (To seem to be – but not really). On this understanding rests the hope of salvation. If Jesus, the incarnate One, is not fully Man then He cannot re-present us. If He is not fully God then He cannot save us. So the reality of the Body and its place in our salvation is critical. Indeed our hope of immortality is bound up in the Risen Body of the Lord. Our identity and continuity in Him is both spiritual and corporeal. This being said we are then conscious of the interaction of body and soul. The hallmarks of holiness are not solely or simply the preserve of the spiritual. Our bodies too bear witness.

That being said, just as in the importance of holy places where great encounters of the divine have taken place, so in the mortal bodies of the saints endures that fragrance of Christ, that incarnate holiness, that tabernacling of the Presence. We are, with the relics, in the Presence of those we know to have been in the Presence and, indeed, are now in the

same glorious Presence *in aeternam*. How would we not want to come and venerate? How would we not want to draw near? It is a very primitive and holy instinct in Man to want to draw near to those he loves and whose lives have deeply affected him. If you want to see a secular affirmation of that truth I suggest you watch a couple of episodes of that excellent programme, 'The Repair Shop'. In it families bring much loved objects to a team of fascinating craftsmen to repair. It might be an old worn doll that Granny gave, a now dilapidated chair that mother sat in, the near perished leather wallet a dad used, the disintegrating shoes of a dancing uncle etc etc

Apart from the pleasure of watching the extraordinary creative and restorative skills of the men and women in the workshop, there is an abiding theme. Almost every one of these objects is the last tangible memory of the person much loved and now departed. The hope of those who submit these precious items is that, by having them restored to their former glory, that memory will continue down the generations. Although totally secular it contains a recognition of the importance of the material in the quest for the intangible of the presence.

When, at the end of the restoration process, the cover is removed and the restored object revealed to the hopeful relative, there is both much emotion and gratitude – often on both sides of the counter. And there is a common mantra..... 'It's as if my mum, dad, uncle, brother, friend was here.'

Of course they are not. But we have deep sympathy and common understanding of those who seek a tangible memorial of that love and a common remembrance of that presence. For we, after all, do have, in our Faith, those very things, Remembrance, Gratitude, Love, the Presence, the promise of Reunion, not worn down by time or subject to decay, but available in the Sacraments and in the materials of grace housed in the reliquaries of saints.

Saint Bernadette.....pray for us.

