



HOMILY by Father Robbie Low

## **6th Sunday of Easter Year A**

### ***God has no favourites***

*Readings: Acts 17: 22-31, Psalm 66, 1 Peter 3:15-18, John 14: 15-21*

Imagine for a moment, if you will, that you are a supporter of Tottenham Hotspur Football Club. I realise that this is a cruel and unusual infliction on the delicate psyche at this time of what looked like being an otherwise pleasant day – but bear with me.

You see me, a fourth generation Arsenal supporter, coming down the road in full 'Gooner' kit and your heart is filled with envy and rage and hostility. I am no different. Rival claimants to the same territory, we launch into a carefully rehearsed chorus of abuse and insult. We go back in history.....reviving the old wounds. We rejoice in other's failures. After our own result the most precious thing is to enjoy the other's loss and rejoice at their misfortune. There is the scarcely disguised hint of racial abuse and, while violence is mercifully rare these days, we have great difficulty in seeing any virtue in each other and doubt our common humanity.

There.....now you have some idea of how disconcerting and shocking today's chapter from the Acts of the Apostles really is. Philip, who first brought foreigners to Jesus is at it again. Here he is in Samaritan territory. The Samaritans, to the Jews, are half caste sons of returning exiles with a debased religious cult. To the Samaritans, the Jews are a jumped up 'johnny come lately' inventor of a new tradition based on Jerusalem and usurping

Bethel etc as the centre of worship – for which please read, in the original texts, Highbury and White Hart Lane. Neither side could even begin to contemplate the claim of the other.

So here is Philip entering the disputed territory with a claim that transcends history and division. He is in the business of converting the Samaritans. This is outrageous to the club conservatives who have never sat comfortably with the parable of the Good Samaritan. To them ‘the only good Samaritan was a dead Samaritan’. Now suddenly they are to be converted and embraced as fellow fans. It is little short of outrageous.

But we must get used to the hitherto unthinkable. The whole central portion of the Acts of the Apostles – the first volume of our church history – throbs to the unsettling revelation of inclusion. EVEN A Samaritan – ever beyond the pale – can repent and be saved.

Worse is to come as the extremist Pharisee Paul converts and declares that he has been ‘vision commanded’ to convert gentiles.

This extraordinary and unimaginable claim is given legs by the experience of none other than St Peter himself who, in vision is called to abrogate the divisive dietary laws and, in a visit to a gentile house, sees the Holy Spirit at work and cannot therefore withhold baptism from the Roman Centurion. (The footballing equivalent is to recognise that the domineering, rich bully on the block for many years - that Evil Empire who wear the devil on their shirts and whose name never passes my lips – might contain some genuine human beings whom God also loves and wants to save. Shattering.

(I can see this is not a sermon for the ladies)

All of this will climax in Acts Ch 15 where, at the Council of Jerusalem the great decision has to be made. The decision, in essence and with the long benefit of hindsight, is simple. Is Christianity – or the WAY as it was originally

known – is Christianity to remain a small Jewish cult or is it intended to become the Universal Church. Is Christ simply a radical rabbi or is He the fulfilment of the promise to Abraham that, in him, all the nations of the earth should be blessed.

Is Jesus the Messiah of the Jews AND the Saviour of the World?

The world is truly turning upside down for the disciples. In the wake of the persecution after the martyrdom of St Stephen, Philip has fled to Samaria, Peter is holed up in Joppa and Paul is in Damascus. They have all reached the same conclusion by different revelatory routes – the unthinkable and the unspeakable are now candidates for God's mercy, for selection for the team.

'I now see', says Peter, 'that God has no favourites'.

And we should be grateful for that radical and courageous recognition. Without it we would not be sitting here as heirs of salvation, the next generation of the Body of Christ and the mission HQ in this place of the truly Universal Church.