



HOMILY by Father Robbie Low

21st Sunday in Ordinary Time - Year B

Offensive Language? The Real Presence

Readings: Joshua 24:1-2, 15-18., Ps33, Ephesians 5: 21-32, John 6: 60-69

‘This is intolerable language. How could anyone accept it?’ John 6: 60-69

For those of us just regaining consciousness on a Sunday morning, we may be struggling to recall the words that Jesus used that were so offensive that, to quote the end of the passage, ‘many of His disciples stopped going with Him’.

Was Our Lord having an unlikely bout of ‘effing and blinding’ as they used to term it? NO

Had He been indulging in what is now termed ‘inappropriate humour’?

The Bible is not overburdened with jokes so this seems unlikely. NO

The offence – and we who live in an ‘offence driven’ culture know this well – is to state the shocking truth and then reap the whirlwind of social disapproval.

What has shocked, dismayed and outraged all but the hardcore followers is something that resides at the very heart of the Mass and of our

relationship with God in Christ. It is no less than the doctrine of the Real Presence.

Christ has just powerfully outlined what he will finally clarify at the Last Supper and ratify on the Calvary, that, in the institution of the Mass, we are invited to participate in the divine life by receiving His Body and His Blood. This is, understandably, to his many hearers deeply shocking. What we take for granted in the Mass is profoundly offensive to the tradition of His earthly time. Remember that, for the Jew – as later for the Muslim - meat must be drained of blood. You must not eat blood because it is the very life of the creature sacrificed. For a Rabbi, even a prophet, even a candidate for Messiahship, to suggest this was madness. To push it further and imply that this ingestion could be human would have been more than enough to revolt the overwhelming majority.

It is interesting to note that, in an aside, when Pliny the Elder, the Roman Governor of Bithynia, writes to the Emperor Trajan for approval of his execution of Christians, he is granted posthumous permission and approval based on what they know of this strange cult of Christians. What do they know? Well, they know three things that weigh heavily against the followers of Christ.

- 1) They are atheists. That is to say that they do not worship Roman Gods, nor even the Jewish alternative but rather some dead carpenter. Ludicrous
- 2) They are orgiastic – their worship consists of ‘Love Feasts’ – a misunderstanding of the word ‘Agape’ – often used for Mass.
- 3) They are cannibals. They claim to eat the flesh and drink the blood of this implausible dead guru.

Such claims are repulsive to even the debased sensibilities of pagan Rome.

Yet much the same debate and dilemma lies behind the ruinous divisions of Christendom in the wake of Luther's schismatic errors. The Protestant vanguard, while claiming solidarity in the authority of Holy Scripture, whilst overturning the unity of the Magisterium that held it all together, were rapidly divided between the remnant 'Real Presencers' – which for a while included Luther himself – and, what I call the 'Real Absencers' led by Zwingli who asserted that Bread was Bread and Wine was Wine – no more no less. This latter position was adopted by the miserable monster of Presvbyterianism, John Knox, whose influence on the Church of England is still to be found in the Prayer Book in the so called 'Black Rubric'. This makes clear that, although people are to kneel – something of which Knox heartily disapproved – nevertheless is simply a sign of gratitude and in no way to be construed as implying the 'depraved' belief that somehow the Body and Blood of Christ were truly present. How Knox would have rejoiced at the post-conciliar Gadarene rush in the Catholic Church to remove the altar rails and deny the faithful the right to kneel. None of this was mandated or even envisaged by the Council, please note.

Unhappily for the 'Real Absencers' of Protestantism and the modernist reductionists in our own Communion, Jesus does not seem to agree with them. He is quite prepared to endure the loss of followers for the sake of the truth, a truth without which there is no true communion, no re-presentation of the Sacrifice of Calvary, no participation in the divine life for the believer.

When a Catholic priest enters the Sanctuary to invoke the Holy Spirit on the elements of Bread & Wine, he does so in the sure and certain knowledge that the Sacramentum (that is to say the oath made by God

Himself to be truly present) will realise, in time, the mystery of eternity and the reality of the reconciling sacrifice between God and Man in the Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity of Christ manifested on the altar and received by the faithful. If the gainsayers are not content with the Scriptural witness of Our Lord Himself then it might be worth adding that none of the many martyrs of the early Church ever avoided persecution and torture and death by denying that truth.

How easy it would have been to simply affirm that the 'offensive language' was merely symbolic, just a metaphor. There is no record of any martyr ever denying the Body and Blood. And why would we? After all, if Christ is not truly present, we are wasting our time here. Let all have a lie-in and, come lunchtime, over our sumptuous roast, try to humanly remember what we cannot have known and raise a decent glass of claret to good old Jesus.

On the other hand, if we want to be part of the divine life, now and in all eternity, where else could we possibly be other than at the Altar of the Sacrifice, refuelled by the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ, the Son of God?