



HOMILY by Father Robbie Low

22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time - Year B

Sacrament of Liberation

Readings: Deuteronomy 4: 1-2, 6-8, Ps 14, James 1: 17-18, 21-22, 27, Mark 7: 1-8, 14-15, 21-23

‘Worthy of your call, worthy of the Kingdom’

I don’t often go off-piste from the set Scriptural readings but you will, I hope, bear with me, briefly, if I begin somewhere else.

These words from St Paul’s Letter to the Church in Thessalonika struck a chord in my heart at the Monday Mass reading this week. It came hard on the heels of my return from a wonderful Sunday Mass recently – you know – one of those moments when you can almost reach out and touch the congregation’s hunger for the things of Christ. An early sign was to arrive at church and find a goodly few praying the Rosary, aligning our wayward hearts with that heart of love for Jesus which is Our Lady. The other promising tell-tale sign was the immediate request for Confessions. The sacrament, precious gift of the Divine Mercy, was celebrated with a beauty and straightforwardness and honesty that betokens serious pilgrims.

One of the things that struck me most powerfully when I became a Catholic was how disastrously the practice of Sacramental Confession had

declined – almost disappeared in some parishes. As tragic evidence of which I have even been to some Catholic churches where the confessional is so redundant that it is filled with lumber or converted into something profoundly less useful.

Why do so many avoid this privileged encounter? It is, after all, the gateway to the Holy Communion of the Mass. When we prepare properly for this Sacrament we are brought up hard against the very words of Jesus in today's Gospel. It is not any dirt that we ingest with unwashed hands that is the problem. It is the stuff that comes out of us, hearts, minds, actions, words that are the real pollutant. So why are we not anxious to shed this stuff? Just on a very human level, I always think, that the secular equivalent of confession is that trip to the corporation tip with a car full of rubbish. We would not have that cluttering up our homes, so we make a special effort to get rid of it. When we have lobbed the last stinking sack or broken bits into the skip, what a disproportionate satisfaction and relief we feel. These two experiences are the physical equivalent of the spiritual sacrament – we would not dream of leaving a bag of rotting rubbish in our sitting room. Why we would wish to hang on to unacknowledged, unconfessed sin? Why would we want to walk around with a bag of manure on our shoulders and pretend there is no inconvenience or foul smell?

If we want to live up to our calling, as St Paul invokes, or be worthy of the Kingdom, as he encourages, this is a necessary and unavoidable task. 'REPENT' is the prior call to the exhortation to 'BELIEVE THE GOSPEL!'

Only when we have acknowledged our sin can we begin to understand what God has done for us in Christ and then praise Him with thankful and unburdened hearts.

The priest who hears your confession is also a penitent sinner – so he understands. He kneels regularly where you kneel and ‘gets real’ with God. I always end my dismissal of the Penitent with the words, ‘Go in peace and pray for me, a sinner.’ This is not an exercise bogus humility but a statement of both fact and need. If you think you are embarrassed by your sin, imagine the lot of the priest who has to pour out his grief and foolishness to his brother priest. He does so, not just because it is his duty but also because, without doing so, he could not fulfil his ministry. He is supremely aware of his high calling and how ingloriously he falls short. When he goes to the altar of Sacrifice he is profoundly aware of his unworthiness. Thus he is vested, over his cassock with a white robe, the alb. This reminds him that he cannot approach the Mysterium Tremendum in his own righteousness – which St Paul describes elsewhere as ‘filthy rags’ - but alone in the Righteousness of Christ. So we should similarly reflect on our state before God at the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass and, having reflected, react accordingly. The practice of Sacramental Confession is not some ancient arcane exercise but the road to freedom.

We enter the door of ‘the cupboard of guilt and shame’ to pour out our grief and own up to the betrayals of our high calling. We do not tell God anything that He does not already know but we have the courage to own it and face the reality of both God and ourselves.

There, properly and painfully prepared, for, as we are reminded by the St Gregory Nazianzus, ‘what is not offered cannot be healed’, we encounter

Jesus, our Saviour, as we kneel at the foot of His Cross and all our sin is swept away by the tide of His redeeming blood.

There, by the invocation of the Holy Spirit, we encounter the Crucified, Risen, Ascended and Glorified Christ and, in the wonder of the sacrament, find ourselves not only welcomed but, as the hymn puts it, 'Ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven'.

The nondescript old door, which we entered in guilt and embarrassment, becomes, for the truly penitent and wonderfully absolved, the very gateway of liberation and the portal of salvation. We can walk out with grateful and determined and joyful hearts to continue the pilgrimage of this Christian life, conscious of just how much we are loved by God and how giddy and foolish we are when we avoid this, Spirit transforming, and now glorious, visit to the Mercy Seat.