



ROME PILGRIMAGE 2024

DAY FOUR

St John Chrysostom, the great preacher, Archbishop of Constantinople, much persecuted by the heretical powers at court and often in exile.

His tomb is always the second place I visit on entry to St Peters. It seems therefore appropriate to begin with this excerpt from the Office of Readings for the day

A sermon of St. John Chrysostom

The waters have risen and severe storms are upon us, but we do not fear drowning, for we stand firmly upon a rock. Let the sea rage, it cannot break the rock. Let the waves rise, they cannot sink the boat of Jesus. What are we to fear? Death? *Life to me means Christ, and death is gain.* Exile? *The earth and its fullness belong to the Lord.* The confiscation of goods? *We brought nothing into this world, and we shall surely take nothing from it.* I have only contempt for the world's threats, I find its blessings laughable. I have no fear of poverty, no desire for wealth. I am not afraid of death nor do I long to live, except for your good. I concentrate therefore on the present situation, and I urge you, my friends, to have confidence.

Do you not hear the Lord saying: *Where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in their midst?* Will he be absent, then, when so many people united in love are gathered together? I have his promise; I am surely not going to rely on my own strength! I have what he has written; that is my staff, my security, my peaceful harbour. Let the world be in upheaval. I hold to his promise and read his message; that is my protecting wall and garrison. What message? *Know that I am with you always, until the end of the world!*

If Christ is with me, whom shall I fear? Though the waves and the sea and the anger of princes are roused against me, they are less to me than a spider's web. Indeed, unless you, my brothers, had detained me, I would have left this very day. For I always say "Lord, your will be done"; not what this fellow or that would have me do, but what you want me to do. That is my strong tower, my immovable rock, my staff that never gives way. If God wants something, let it be done! If he wants me to stay here, I am grateful. But wherever he wants me to be, I am no less grateful.

Yet where I am, there you are too, and where you are, I am. For we are a single body, and the body cannot be separated from the head nor the head from the body. Distance

separates us, but love unites us, and death itself cannot divide us. For though my body die, my soul will live and be mindful of my people.

You are my fellow citizens, my fathers, my brothers, my sons, my limbs, my body. You are my light, sweeter to me than the visible light. For what can the rays of the sun bestow on me that is comparable to your love? The sun's light is useful in my earthly life, but your love is fashioning a crown for me in the life to come.

The day dawned dull and overcast. The forecast is for storms and torrential rain. This is no laughing matter in Rome these days. The previous week the wind had been so bad that the air pressure blew off an inner door in the Seminary and the streets were awash in seconds. In the light of this we decided, reluctantly, that the long haul out to Tre Fontane and the site of St Paul's martyrdom, was a non-starter. Each of us had their own priorities of places we wanted to see and so, with a little guidance, we set off to explore and create our own memories. For one this meant a revisit to S. Catherine and another to S. Monica, while a third set out in search of a very obscure saint of whom the rest of us had never heard. For my part I simply plumbed myself into the nearest holy site and got on with the praying for those whose intentions I had carried with me to Rome. To be able to simply turn up at the holy sites and be, at once, heart to heart with God is a fantastic privilege.

At the end of the morning, a light lunch in the apartment, followed by a siesta completed an uneventful, for me, first shift. Late afternoon I went out to see if the Jewish quarter had any bargain casual jackets. My old one, given to me as a cast-off by a well to do parishioner in my first parish, forty years ago, is wearing a bit thin !

We reconvened at the English College for Mass. The altar contains relics of the English Martyrs. It is a daily reminder of the viciousness that accompanied the Reformation and the attempt to extirpate the historic faith in the new, soon to be secular, emerging states.

One martyrdom, in its awful simplicity, stands out for me when I think of this period. Thomas Bosgrave was condemned for the simple act of giving his hat to the recently arrested priest, Fr John Cornelius. For this tiny act of charity and gesture of solidarity, Bosgrave was condemned and hanged. Many of the martyrs were also 'drawn and quartered' an act of stomach churning barbarity which peppered the reign of the 'Virgin Queen'.

That evening we convened for a long and joyful supper and update on our adventures. The restaurant, on the Campo itself, was a good place to finish a kaleidoscopic day and give thanks for our companionship on the Pilgrim Way.

The following morning I awoke to an invitation to be the principal celebrant at that sacred altar for the Feast of the Holy Cross. It is now called the Exaltation of the Holy Cross. Years gone by it was known as the 'Invention of the Holy Cross' but was changed to avoid modern confusion. INVENTION comes from the Latin word INVENIO - 'I find' and refers to the discovery of the True Cross (among many other relics of the primitive faith) by the Emperor Constantine's mother, St Helena.

I was almost overcome with emotion and was trembling as I came to the altar to embrace the privilege of such exalted company and with whom I am unworthy to stand.

I recalled, strange juxtaposition, the words of the long dead American Jewish comedian and social commentator, Lenny Bruce, who said that the Cross had been reduced to a piece of jewellery hung round a woman's neck. To get a real idea of its meaning, he suggested, the modern equivalent would be to hang a model of the Electric Chair round your neck. It was brutal and merciless and terminal.

That is a reminder of how much God loves us, that His sacrifice is so amazing. With St Paul, we are to declare nothing except Christ ...and Him crucified.'

The morning was also memorable for the sudden knowledge that, after two years waiting, we had been given a new bishop in Plymouth, Fr Philip Moger (currently assistant bishop in Southwark).

In the light of this joyful news the Mass was offered for him.

It was a good way to end this part of the pilgrimage and wish our little group 'Safe home'.

Fr Robbie Low