



HOMILY by Father Robbie Low

### **3rd Sunday in Lent – Year C**

#### ***Time and Eternity***

*Readings: Exodus 3:1-8, 13-15, Ps 102, 1 Corinthians 10:1-6, 10-12, Luke 13:1-9*

It was several decades ago now.....or was it last week..... or perhaps even next week? I can't rightly say. Bear with me a moment before you conclude that I am losing what is left of my marbles.

Let me tell the story and then you decide.

Whenever..... and there's a word to conjure with – When? Ever?

Sorry...the story.

I was standing in the slype of St Alban's Cathedral where I was Chaplain for five years, waiting to process in for Evensong. It was the summer holidays and the Cathedral Choir was replaced by visiting choirs. This particular evening it was a choir from a Roman Catholic school, the then Dean, the remarkable Peter Moore, being the first man to open an English Cathedral to the celebration of the Mass since the Reformation. The accompanying priest, a caricature Irishman, was clearly very nervous. The Dean invited him to lead us in a prayer of preparation. What he intended to say, I suspect, was that this good work of liturgy would grant us some remittance of our time in Purgatory. He was, after all, not just addressing God in his prayer but also trying to evangelise the black hearted Protestants who had stolen this great building from the

true Church at the Reformation. What he actually said was that he prayed to God that this work would gain us 'time off eternity'. The Dean and I exchanged knowing glances and managed to suppress a fit of the giggles. Time and Eternity are strange bedfellows and the definition of Eternity put forward by another Irishman, James Joyce, puts it in some awesome perspective.

'Imagine, if you will, a bird taking a grain of sand, once every thousand years, and placing it in a place to build into a pile. By the time that pile of sand grains has grown into the highest mountain on earth.....not one second of Eternity will have passed.'

A terrifying thought, utterly, I would suggest, beyond our capacity to grasp. Indeed, leaving the embarrassment of our visiting priest aside, none of could begin to define the meaning and measure of either Time or Eternity. Perhaps the most bought and least read book of my lifetime is Stephen Hawking's 'A Brief History of Time'. Even the cleverest people rarely get beyond page ten and the publishers had to publish a companion 'mugs' guide – 'A Briefer History of Time'.

Time, as we know it, is fundamentally a human construct. It is not real. It is a convenient way of measuring out our days, mindful of the Past – if it is indeed that - whilst engaged in the Present – if that were possible – and fearful and hopeful for the Future, should there be one.

But even in this simplistic understanding there are insurmountable hurdles. We think that we are living in the Present but the truth is that all of us are living in the past. As you hear my words and they register on your consciousness - I am being optimistic here – by the time that has happened, albeit micro seconds, the Present is somewhere else. We are responding to the immediate past.

Natural Science, pace Hawkings, struggles to explain this dilemma. But, contrary to the arguments and fondest hopes of the fashionable school

of scientific atheism, which Hawkings represents, theology does not duck the issue.

Here, in the wake of last week's Gospel of the Transfiguration, the lectionary takes us back about three and a half millennia to Moses – one of the characters who appears at the Transfiguration. It is to Moses that God, from the Bush of Fire, reveals His identity.

In response to Moses question, 'Who are you?',

God replies 'I AM WHO I AM'

He uses, for our purposes and understanding, the first person singular PRESENT tense of the verb 'TO BE'.

I AM WHO I AM

To quote one commentator, this is

'the ultimate statement of self-sufficiency, self-existence, and immediate presence. God's existence is not contingent upon anyone else. His plans are not contingent upon any circumstances. He promises that He will be what He will be; that is, He will be the eternally constant God. He stands, ever-present and unchangeable, completely sufficient in Himself, sovereign to do what He wills to do and to accomplish what He wills to accomplish.'

What He always has been, is and will be are contained in this declaration. It is no accident then that Jesus employs this divine formula in the great 'I AM' sayings of St John's Gospel. (I AM the Way, the vine, the good shepherd, light of the world etc). Let anyone who says that Jesus never declared Himself divine soak up those passages. It is no accident, therefore, that the Church declares that Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever.

What we learn with Moses, prostrate before the Bush of Fire, is the identity of the Almighty as, not only the source of all being – He being the quintessential Being – but that He is the Eternal Present in which all

time takes place and which is re-memorable and thus re-presentable.

This is both the key to the very heart of the Mass in which the events of history, the sacrifice of Christ on Golgotha, can be re-presented , offered anew and experienced now.

It is here on the Altar of that Sacrifice that time and eternity co-inhere and we, the mortal, limited by the constraints of that mortality and fallen humanity, may be swept up, in Christ, into the immortal and the divine and the eternal. As the disciples discover on the Mountain of the Transfiguration, this Heaven of the Eternal Present invites us time bound creatures into the liberty of forever with the Patriarchs and Prophets, Apostles, Saints and Martyrs, as we respond to the self- revelation of the I AM who is sovereign and eternal and who dwells in Time with Man that man may dwell in Eternity with God - even Christ Jesus, Our Lord.