



HOMILY by Father Robbie Low

2nd Sunday of Easter, Year C – Divine Mercy Sunday

The Corrosion of Doubt

Readings: Acts 5: 12-16, Ps 117, Ap 1: 9-13, 17-19, John 20: 19-31

When I was a young man the dominant theme of Christian apologetics was ‘doubt’. Indeed, so prevalent was the syndrome that ‘doubt’ became almost a hallmark of authenticity. Any man who could not muster some significant doubts about the Faith was scarcely worthy of the title ‘Christian’ and most likely to be dismissed as an ‘unthinking fundamentalist’. There was even a trend in seminaries to encourage ‘critical thinking’ – a reasonable thing in itself but too often a code for imbibing the noxious brew of 19th century German deconstruction of the Gospel texts and evisceration of much of the rest of the Word of God. Across the range of churches it was a strong man who survived the training colleges of the 1970s with his faith intact. The men who exhibited the most uncertainties became living legends and their works a new ‘canon’.

Now I do not pretend that the experience of doubt cannot be, properly and prayerfully endured, an eventual enhancement to our following of Christ because it can lead, via the questions put, to a deeper understanding and surer grip of the Faith. But as a dominant theme of discipleship, it is disastrous in its corrosive effect upon the Church.

‘If the bugle gives an uncertain sound, who will follow?’

An apparent switch of focus for a moment.....

Forty five years ago I was in my curacy. My duties included a share in the local Hospital Chaplaincy. I visited each bed of my seven 24 bed wards each week and did the Communion round early Sunday and the afternoon prayers on each ward at 3pm when the ward bulged with visitors. One evening I was called to the bedside of an old lady who was clearly, if gently, dying. She was fully conscious and in no apparent distress. I had spoken with her before over the weeks of her hospital stay. She had, she said, something she wanted to tell me. Her story was simple but profound.

As a young married woman she had given birth to a little girl and brought her home. The child quickly sickened and, late one night as she sat nursing the faltering flame of life, the little girl died in her mother's arms. But it was not that simple. As the child lay dying, the old woman had seen an angel descend and receive her daughter's soul. In the midst of this unimaginable grief, consolation was given in a remarkable way. She had, she said, no sorrow because she knew her child was home with God and safe. She told all who would listen but, they, assuming her to be unhinged by grief and thus detached from ordinary emotions and responses, prepared to section her. At that point she ceased to tell her story and had remained silent ever since. But, before she died she wanted to tell someone who would believe her. Our previous conversations had given her the assurance that I was such a person. And so she gave me the gift of her story, her encounter- to be used, wherever, to the glory of God. She died later that night.

Switch forward forty years or more to a meeting of a men's fellowship group I was speaking to. I shared with them some moments of profound encounter – not the usual stuff of clerical after dinner speaking.

After the meeting three of the most private chaps, encouraged by my straightforward account, came forward to share with me their own life-changing encounters with the Lord. In each case they had not really shared these before because, as they saw it, the world would think them mad and the church think them presumptuous.

In a world where doubts are encouraged and boldly advertised as a kind of perverse virtue, the rehearsal of the validating experience of faith is regarded as a sign of simplistic fantasy. 'It is indeed', to quote the Jacobean playwright Thomas Middleton, 'a mad world, my masters'.

But, lest we think of doubt as a purely modern affliction, we must consult the Holy Scriptures afresh. In the wake of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, the apostolic band are in utter disarray. Thomas is not alone in doubting his colleagues experience of the Risen Lord. He may have demanded tangible proof personally and discounted the witness of his fellow apostles BUT remember they, in their turn, had discounted the witness of the Magdalene and the women Myrrh -Bearers as idle gossip.

The witnesses to the Resurrection were dismissed as hormonal women whose evidence could not be relied upon.

In one account when those returning from the encounter at Emmaus vouchsafe their meeting with Christ, they are not believed until the other disciples have the same experience.

Even on the departure of Christ in Matthew's Gospel, we are told that some doubted who He was still.

Last week I was in Lourdes where a brave young girl refused to budge from her story of having seen the beautiful lady, the Immaculate Conception. 'Mad, bad, attention seeking, a liar', the attacks flowed. She was duly vindicated and millions every year flock to the little otherwise undistinguished town of Lourdes where, were it not for her story, no-one would give the little cleft in the rock a second glance. We would not be here

The lesson we might take from all this is really two-fold.

First: We ought to be brave enough to tell our stories. They are a challenge to the secular world AND they are a great weapon of evangelism

Second it builds up confidence in God, in one another and in and our fellow pilgrims.

It also builds confidence in ourselves.....the more we tell the story, the deeper it embeds and the more amazed and grateful we become for God's mercy. It's a win/win situation.

Doubt may be the common currency of our deracinated culture.

It is not commended by Jesus.