



THE CROSS - THE KEY: 5th Sunday in Ordinary Time Year A

Homily by Fr Robbie Low

Readings: Isaiah 58: 7 – 10, Ps 111, 1 Corinthians 2: 1–5, Matthew 5: 13-16

Paul is almost always self-deprecating about his preaching ability. Maybe he is right but you would struggle to believe that if his writings are anything to go by. But we know that not all great writers are great speakers and vice versa. What we do know from this passage is that Paul has learnt the lesson from Athens. There he engaged the local fine minds on the Areopagus and sought to take them on in their own intellectual and philosophical territory. It was a failure –not because Paul was not capable of intellectual combat but because philosophical speculation does not lead to commitment or action. It can, on the contrary, be the perfect screen for evasion. If I had a pound for every drunk or philosopher who had engaged me in argument about faith because they like an argument not because they are committed to truth, I would be a rich man. That is not to say that we must be philosophical neophytes – priests have philosophy as a fundamental part of their training – but what converts is an encounter with Christ. Hence Paul determines to know only Christ – and Him crucified. The heart of the matter is the essential Gospel, the plan of salvation in the wake of the Fall of Man, which culminates in the Sacrifice of the Calvary and the

triumph over sin and death. In order to do this fundamental concepts are challenged. For the Jew – Paul a determined Jew himself – this proclamation is shocking. The Law decrees that anyone who is hanged on a tree is accursed. (Dt 21 v 23) How can Jesus then be the Christ?

This is to ignore the great passage in Isaiah 53 about the suffering servant and also to fail to understand that it is precisely the curse of sin and death that dooms Man that the sinless Christ takes to the tree and crucifies with Himself.

To the Greek the conception of the Resurrection of the Body is utter nonsense. It is the body that weighs down the soul. If there is an afterlife then the soul is free of the naughty encumbrance of the mortal body in all its physical and moral frailty. Again this is to misunderstand the concept of Resurrection. For the Christian there is integrity of body and soul. The identity of man is not in separate compartments. We are an integrity, a whole. Any futurity must necessarily encompass that reality. The body that we are raised with is both a continuity of the self and yet a new and now eternal creation. Witness the tangible reality of Christ's Body in the Resurrection appearances and yet its transformation and ubiquity. Paul will dwell on this much later in this letter. But, for the Christian, we are who we are. We are not divisible and we are not (pace other philosophies) able to be reconstituted as someone else. There is identity and continuity. Transformation - yet recognisable and capable of relationship with one another and with God. In short, the Christian claim is unique. In the endgame it is nothing short of the apotheosis of Man.

Having dealt with the hazards of the Jewish and Greek opposition, Paul turns to the internal mindset of the Corinthian Church. It is abundantly clear that, having been incorporated into Christ, an unhealthy sense of spiritual superiority has grown up. I have met congregations where the people, usually a self-authenticating clique, have preferred their own teaching to that of the Apostle.

Paul reminds the Corinthians of the need for a little –actually a lot of – humility. He does not preface his remarks with the words, ‘Who do you think you are?’ but they are tacit.

You are not the smartest, most successful, top drawer people. God didn’t choose you because you ticked all the boxes. He chose you, let’s be clear about this, to show that the glory belongs to Him. You are not the sharpest knives in the box. Any wisdom you have is a gift from Him. You are not powerful or strong. Your strength is in Christ alone. Have a good look in the mirror. Or as our American cousins say, ‘Wake up and smell the coffee’. We have nothing to boast about except what God has done for us in Christ.

Humility, at the end of the day, is simply the necessary encounter with reality.

‘When I came to you, brethren, I did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God in lofty words or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.’

Here we see the effect of Athens on Paul. Philosophical ‘smartarsery’ doesn’t get results, just more conversation. Paul knows that what grabbed him on the Damascus Road was the encounter with the Crucified and Risen Lord. Those of us with a lifetime preaching experience are often humbled to find that our ‘finest works’ have yielded no apparent fruit BUT a grateful fellow pilgrim will then both encourage and unknowingly shame us by mentioning some unsophisticated and embarrassingly simple homily we gave years before that changed their life. Preaching is not about us. It is about Jesus. No real preaching can avoid the Cross. No road around Calvary leads to true conversion and the hope of glory.

Paul speaks of his ‘fear and trembling’. Puzzled? Surely Paul was, of all men, the most confident? But hark. A preacher who does not approach his task in fear and trembling has missed the point.

First, he is privileged to handle and expound the Word of God. He presents and represents Christ. It is an awesome responsibility. Upon the faithful presentation of the Gospel hangs the fate of souls. Now we begin to get a glimpse of Paul's rightful fears.

There is also the natural human desire to be liked, to be approved of by others. The preacher knows that, if he preaches true, some will repent and others will resent. Paul was tough but not insensitive to rejection or disapproval. At a human level, if we are honest, we like to be liked. It takes courage to risk the truth-telling anyway and in spite of personal cost.

But there is another aspect of this nervousness that we need to understand. When I used to interview wedding couples they almost invariably said that they were nervous. To which I would reply, 'So am I.'

Why, I had done it countless times before? Yes but it is a different kind of nervousness. It is not a paralysing fear. It is the nervousness of a team lining up in the tunnel for a Cup Final. They are excited, nervous, fully prepared, know how much is riding on this day, this performance, this presentation. Their whole lives are being summed up here and no effort will be spared. The preacher who wanders to the pulpit to shuffle another lazy assurance of God's love and is not caught by that flutter of excitement, holy fear and awesome responsibility will never excite others about Jesus.

It should be the same every time he comes to the altar to celebrate the wedding of Heaven and Earth, of God and Man, of Time and Eternity in the re-presentation of Christ Crucified - which is the Mass.