



## **11th Sunday in Ordinary Time Year A: The Church is not a club**

**Homily by Fr Robbie Low**

***Readings: Exodus 19:2-6a; Ps 100, Romans 5:6-11; Mark 9:36-10:8***

Several light years ago I was in conversation with a kindly old Anglican bishop from these parts. He understood the dilemma I was facing as the Church, to which we then both belonged, came increasingly adrift of its doctrinal and ethical moorings. In spite of my opposition to the Establishment's direction of travel, he offered me a job in his diocese.

At the end of our talk, he put his arm around my shoulder and uttered the well-meaning but, for me, decisive statement.

'Don't leave the Church of England, Rob, it's a jolly good club.'

A club exists for the benefit of its members.

The Church, uniquely, exists primarily for the benefit of those outside it.

I recalled this conversation and its effect on my thinking as I was reading the Old Testament text for today's Mass. The Hebrew slaves, liberated from Egyptian tyranny, are three months into what will be their long sojourn in the Wilderness on the journey to the land of the Promise.

They had won the battle for survival against the Amalekites and moved on from the plains of Rephidim and were now encamped at the foot of Sinai. They were about to witness the great Theophany of God and, through Moses, receive the gift of the Law which would henceforth define their history and their vocation.

God says to them, 'If you will obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.'

## A KINGDOM OF PRIESTS

It is a promise that the first of the Sunday Prefaces in the Mass is pleased to repeat of the Church of Jesus Christ – you and me. So what does it mean?

First of all the kingdom part..... A kingdom is that area over which a king rules. Straightforward enough. Thus the People of God are not mere citizens of earth but subjects of the King, the Creator of all ,our origin and our end, the Alpha and the Omega of all things.

The subjects are conformed to the will of the sovereign Lord.

But a kingdom of priests? What is a priest?

A priest is one who goes between God and Man. He brings the needs of his people before God and the word of God to his people. Hence the historical orientation of the priest before all the changes of the post conciliar years.

He faced East, leading his people in prayer before the Altar of God and, like Aaron the priest, bearing the people on his heart.

He faced his people, Westward, when delivering the Word of God to them.

The priest offered the sacrifice, the Atonement, which washed away the sins of his people and reunited them with God. What are we to make of this kingdom of priests then?

God has raised up, first in His chosen people and then in His Church, a people who exist for the benefit of the world.

We are there to come before God, on behalf of the fallen world, praying for its salvation, its return to the Kingdom, its repentance and absolution through the Blood of the Lamb. We will recall Abraham interceding before God for the corrupt cities of the Plain, whom God was about to destroy.

And we will remember the Call of Abraham, whose descendants by faith, we are, when it was decreed by God that he would be a blessing to all nations on Earth. And we observe his mysterious meeting with the Priest of the Most High God, Melchisedek, whom we namecheck in the Roman Canon of the Mass, and to whom, significantly, Abraham pays tribute. Like our forefather, Abraham, we are there to go before the world, on behalf of God, to call the world back to God, speaking His Word which is Christ, the Word made flesh.

In order to do this, with any hope of effecting that saving reconciliation, those priests, that priesthood, must be penitent, godward, obedient, loving, faithful subjects of the King of Kings. Anything else will not 'cut it'.

Now we know that there are priests of God, by His dispensation and grace. We see them in the Sanctuary, Sunday by Sunday. They are the Apostolic Priesthood, the chosen and ordained, not for any merit of their own, to ensure the faithful handing on of the Faith – for that is what the *Traditio, the Tradition* means. The Priest, from the humblest parish priest to the Pope in Rome, is not at liberty to set before you anything that is not of Christ and / or inconsistent with the historic teaching of the Church. He is not there to indulge his own opinions in preference to divine revelation. That is a different kind of 'handing over' – it is the handing over effected by the fallen disciple, Judas Iscariot who, impatient with God and with, in his mind, a better plan, handed over Christ to be crucified.

The Apostolic priesthood exists to serve God and to serve the wider priesthood of His people as they go out to witness in and to the world. For that is what this means. Every single member of the Church of Jesus Christ, Our Lord and Saviour, is called upon to be a priest to the world. The 'priesthood of all believers', as Protestants call it, is not an invention of the Reformation but an expression of the reality, of the whole purpose, point and calling of the Church. The Apostolic Priesthood is there to teach, guard and defend the truth of God's salvation but it is to be taken out into the world by the Kingdom of Priests – and that, my dear brothers and sisters, would be you.

A club exists for the benefit of its members.

The Church exists for the salvation of the world.