



HOMILY by Father Robbie Low

6th Sunday of Easter - Year B

God has no favourites

Readings: Acts 25-26, 34-35, 44-48, Ps 97, 1 John 4: 7-10, John 15: 19-17

Some years ago now one of my former students sent me a delightful birthday present. It was a simple white t-shirt that bore the legend, 'JESUS LOVES YOU'. Underneath, in slightly lower font, it continued provocatively, 'But I'm His Favourite'.

It was nice to be appreciated even if, truth to tell, there are not many occasions when I'm allowed to wear it. It would, I am reliably informed, only stir lesser souls to envy and resentment. So, for the most part, it hangs out in the wardrobe. I thought you would want to know and appreciate this noble gesture of self-denial and laudable humility.

As I was rummaging through my vest drawer earlier this week the very garment represented itself and, being a man who believes in providence rather than coincidence, I took it to be a word from the Lord, tying in so closely, as it does with today's Scripture.

Continuing our adventures in the life of the early Church, through the Acts of the Apostles, we encounter St. Peter at a seminal moment in the

life of the mission. He has had vision in which God has abrogated the dietary laws of His people and then, hot on the heels of this shocking revelation, Peter is called to the house of some Gentiles who are being called to follow Jesus and, in the very presence of the Apostle, powerfully receive the Holy Spirit.

The importance of these two events cannot be understated. Peter, as a devout Jew, had never eaten unclean foodstuffs or, in consequence, been able to freely mix socially with gentiles – never mind share a common table. The Great Commission of Jesus, at the end of Matthew's Gospel, to go out and baptise the world had, hitherto, been taken as an invitation to get Jews of the Diaspora to accept Jesus as the Messiah. After all Jesus had come, surely, as Messiah, to save God's chosen people – His Favourites.

What happens on this momentous day is twofold. Peter, and consequently the whole Apostolic mission, are reconnected with the original reason for the calling of Israel. Why was Israel chosen? To be, in the words of the promise to Abraham, a blessing to the whole world, to lead men back to God. They were not chosen simply to be 'teacher's pet' but as the instrument of God's saving mercy. The Messiah for Israel, therefore, did not cease His salvific work at the borders of the Holy Land but continued them into the whole of creation.

As if this was not shocking enough, it recalled a bizarre incident some years before when, in the wake of the martyrdom of St. Stephen, a bigoted zealot named Saul had gone rampaging up to Damascus to persecute the Church, had a vision and instead preached the Gospel

claiming it was his job to take it to the gentiles. Fear, distrust and hostile sentiment saw his enthusiasm put under a fire blanket and the over enthusiastic Paul shipped back to his home turf to await further instructions. He had been patiently waiting the discernment of the Church for almost a decade.

Peter realised now, and instantaneously, that this maverick was the real mc.coy, there could be no division at the holy table and that the Church of God was truly universal. God really did have no favourites. The Church was now moving inexorably to an understanding of itself as universal – Catholic. The scene was set for the recall of Paul, the decisive Council of Jerusalem and a thirty year battle between those who grasped the world wide mission of Jesus and those who went around metaphorically dressed in my favourite unwearable t-shirt.

Just as the Jews were chosen by God to keep His Name Holy and call men to return to Him, so the Church exists primarily for those outside it. We are favoured by His Presence in the sacraments. We are blessed by His promises of eternity. We enjoy the solidarity of our friendship with one another and the saints in glory on the pilgrim way. But we **exist** to bear witness to God's love for the world and, by our mission and ministry, our word and example, our faithfulness and joy in His mercy, call all men home to Him.

Peter had to get a new T-shirt. I guess I shall have to do the same.