



HOMILY by Father Robbie Low

12<sup>th</sup> Sunday 2018-The Nativity of St John the Baptist- BODMIN

### A ROUGH PASSAGE

A couple of weeks ago someone asked if I thought the Church would still be around in five hundred years time.

My answer was immediate. 'Yes. Unless the Lord had already come.'

My answer has not changed since then but I have pondered a great deal on what prompted the question.

It is one of those periods in cultural history when profound uncertainties seem to hold the ring. At one level we could be looking at one of those turning points where the old order simply fades away. Where, for example, now are the gods of Greece and Rome? The pantheon of godlets with their replication of human follies, projection of all our foibles and catastrophic relationships have vanished like morning mist yet once they held sway over the hearts and minds of Man.

Have we then arrived at the same terminus for the peculiar and unique Hebrew cultus that both remains intact and has yet burgeoned into the universal creed of Christianity? A religion that has occupied and preoccupied the civilisations of Man for two millennia. A Faith that most have either accepted or, in their religious and philosophical journeys, had to either explain or explain away.

You might say that I have a professional interest in the answer being 'No'. But, as a man and a priest I have an interest only in the answer being true. And, after all, the priest, being daily near the sacrifice yet

also the watchman on the walls and the walker of the boundaries, has more opportunities than most to gaze into the abyss.

It is, currently, very difficult for us (and for our children and grandchildren) to have our voice heard in a culture which has largely abandoned God. To be religious, in much of western Europe, is to be thought of as anything from odd to bigoted to downright deranged. The end of post-Enlightenment thinking is atheistic and has disappeared down the blind alley of post-modernism and deconstructionism. It has purposely taken leave of objective truth and is contemptuous of those who hold to such outdated folly. It is a reductionist and materialistic philosophy whose ruthlessness is disguised in sentimentalism and the perversion of language. It is in flight from the recognition of its own pointlessness and occupies its passing time in entertaining itself to death.

The culture in which we live contains also within it a casual racism. It is convinced that exposure to its unwisdom will rapidly convert the believer. Those cheerful Africans who get so enthusiastic about Jesus will soon wise up from their backward state. Those serious Asians with their commitment to prayer and awkward fundamentalism will quickly come round. Those Hispanics and Eastern Europeans will overcome their superstitions. A few years in a liberal society which glorifies promiscuity and enthuses about unnatural relations and hunts down the unborn will soon put them right. This is the fatal vanity of our native heath.

The problem for western Europe is that it is dying of its own stupidity and arrogance. Convinced of the pointlessness of existence our culture is not reproducing itself. Nor is it convincing anyone else of its rectitude. The rest of the world is becoming more religious not less. The centre of gravity of Christendom has dramatically shifted and that is

uncomfortable for us. But the Church has not diminished nor has Christ disappeared from the hearts of men.

There have been times like this before in our history. In the dark ages that followed the collapse of Roman hegemony, the Church hung on in monastery and parish in the midst of savage persecution by pagan tribes only to emerge victorious as, one by one, the dark lords came to acknowledge Christ as Saviour

The Viking terror was, at great cost and sacrifice, transformed into settlement and salvation.

In the fourth century, so newly established as both free and the religion of the Empire, Christianity found itself under threat. A great heresy, Arianism, a denial of the divinity of Christ, took hold of the governing powers of the state. St. Athanasius stood almost alone for the true Faith. It was said that 'The whole world had become Arian'. It was 'Athanasius contra mundum' – Athanasius against the world. In the darkest moments, when he was pursued for his life, he fled in a small boat with a few supporters down the Nile. A later historian asked the question, 'Where, at that moment, was the Catholic Church when all the world had become Arian?' His answer was simple and profound.

'The Catholic Church could be found fleeing in a boat down the Nile'

There have been times when the Faith seems to have hung by a thread – when Pope Leo the Great rode out to confront Attila before the gates of Rome- but it has never failed.

Today's Gospel sees the birth of the golden boy, angel trumpeted, Christ proclaiming, repentance calling forerunner of the Messiah, John the Baptist. He will end his days in darkness and questioning, in a prison cell and on the executioner's block with, to him, the whole enterprise now in jeopardy. Doubt and difficulty are not the preserve of

the ordinary believer. The saints have been there too- but they turn to Jesus.

Later the whole apostolic band will find itself facing destruction in a little boat on the waters of the Galilee, storm tossed and terrified. Amidst the tumultuous waves and the power of the elements, the Church herself seems in imminent danger of foundering. The force of the waters of chaos threaten the very existence of the People of God. What we, like the foundational disciples, fear is that we will be overwhelmed and swept away in the tide that is now running – albeit, like on Galilee, a very local event.

At times like this we need to remember the whole Gospel. The Lord is in the boat with us. The Lord of all creation is present in the Ark of Salvation, the ship of the Church and He has power over all the elements no matter how unruly or threatening. We need not fear being overwhelmed or swept away if Christ is with us. Like the first disciples

we may sometimes cry out: ‘Master,  
do you not care? We are sinking fast.’

will hear the same reply:

‘Be still. Be calm. Why are you afraid? Have you no faith.’

If we set out without Jesus then we are truly sunk.

But, so long as Jesus is on board, the ship of the Church will, like the Ark before it, ride high above the waters of judgement and chaos and come safely to harbour and to home.