



HOMILY by Father Robbie Low

7th Sunday of Easter-Year C-June 2nd 2019

***Readings: Acts 7: 55-60, Psalm 96, Apocalypse 22: 12-14, 16-17, 20,
John 17: 20-26***

Many years ago an old friend of mine was given the task, by his bishop, of introducing some changes into his new parish. He was a gentle man and he went to great lengths to explain the plans. The first sign that things were not going well came when he observed, at the main Sunday service, the senior layman and warden pulling his duffel coat hood over his head and very ostentatiously putting his fingers in his ears. It did not end well. Last week you may have heard a heated exchange outside a school gate in Birmingham. An irate Muslim parent, protesting at the imposition of homosexual propaganda on young children, was objecting to the patronising cant of his local MP. Speaking simultaneously neither party was listening to the other. They might as well have had their fingers in their ears.

I thought of these contrasting but similar events when reading today's excerpt from the Acts of the Apostles. Faced with the testimony of Deacon Stephen, the leaders of the nation stuffed their fingers in their ears. They were simply not going to listen. The consequence was, as we quickly learn, the summary and bloody murder of the man who challenged their authority.

What has all this got to do with us? We are, as a nation and indeed as a culture, in danger of descending, in public debate, into just such a dialogue of the deaf. The events of the last three years have underlined the fragility of representative democracy when its governing class think they can continue in despite of the people they purport to represent. The events of my lifetime demonstrate that this is not a recent bad habit. What now is described as 'British values', for example, is the result of a long secularising process to impose anti- Christian values on a Christian culture without ever including these proposals in a manifesto or party prospectus. Disconnection is not an overnight novelty.

Perhaps the most disturbing result of our recent unhappiness is the demonization of those who disagree. This has descended from the usual casual party tribalism to vicious personalised rebuke and suspicion and contempt.

My oldest friend, we have been buddies since we were seven years old, and I hold very different views on the presenting issue. It was possible for us to have a profound economic and constitutional discussion without rancour. We respect the possibility that one can hold the other view without being a pantomime villain. Sadly the national debate, manipulated by the media, has been reduced to sloganeering, suspicion, irrational fear of the other and unrestrained expressions of contempt. This is not only divisive of families and communities but the entry into very dangerous territory.

As Christians we are not constitutionally wedded to any particular form of government and have lived under every type but we value democracy, with all its imperfections, because it affords equal value to every human being. The consequences for democracy of caricaturing and dismissing what we find disagreeable is a negation of the very process of debate and examination that is its lifeblood.

The assumption that supporters of one side are all merely collaborationists in denial of sovereignty simply because they want to

work with others is bizarre. The condemnation of those who take a different constitutional view as malevolently and deliberately conspiring to impoverish their grandchildren is barking. The rejection of anti-establishment populism because its very popularity condemns it as de facto 'evil' avoids the very question it asks and is to reject the long triumph of democracy ground out over two centuries of reform and inclusion.

The politics of contempt is the short road to ruin.

When people cease to listen to each other bad things happen.

Today's story in Acts ends in institutional and mob violence. The first Christian martyr, whose prayers – as patron of servers – we invoke before every Mass, is brutally murdered because he spoke the truth.

Wherever the debate ends and people put their fingers in their ears and scream at those who hold different views, society teeters on the edge of violence. Those who will not listen and those who feel they are not being heard abandon the process that has guaranteed their peace and freedom and mutual valuing. We should not deceive ourselves by believing that we alone are too sophisticated and advanced a society to disintegrate with the terrifying consequence of violence and bloodshed.

As Christians, as the Church, weakened though we are in the secular West, we may yet have a vital role to play. As a family we have, through two millennia, lived under every form of Government. We know the consequences. We know the difference between tyranny and martyrdom and the virtues of value and mutual flourishing. Our gift to an historically and philosophically illiterate country, mired in its rejection of the Faith, with little understanding of its past and no common vision of its destiny, may yet be to hold the ring and bring perspective to the determinative debate. At the moment that debate operates in a dangerous vacuum of faith and virtue. The result of our allegiance to Christ is to value and seek the best for the other. That is the Cross. We have to witness to that truth both for the immediate safety of our people and for their eternal salvation.

It will not be a comfortable place to stand and it may involve martyrdom. We will only be able to do it if, with Stephen, we look heavenward and understand the eternal as well as the temporal context. The dialogue of the deaf gives comfort only to the Old Enemy of Man because it demeans the image of God in the other and foments chaos.