



HOMILY by Fr Robbie Low

20th Sunday in Ordinary Time-Year C-August 18th 2019

**Readings: Jeremiah 38: 4-6.,8-10,Psalm 39, Hebrews 12: 1-4,
Luke 12: 49-53**

Those of you with long memories may recall a rock band of the 1970s called 'Canned Heat'. They derived their name from a cooking fuel which was often the last and fatal resort of alcoholics. Their best known hit was 'On the road again' but they also pumped out a little choral foot-tapper which went:

'Together we stand, divided we fall
Come on now people, let's get on the ball and work together
Come on, come on let's work together, now now people
Because together we will stand, every boy , girl woman and man'
(We could have that as our recessional hymn.)

This sentiment was echoed by St John of Elton & by The Brotherhood of Man, a foursome that went on to win the festival of high camp, Eurovision, in the days when a British victory was still possible. Their line went: United we stand divided we fall and if our backs should be against the wall, We'll be together etc. etc.

These worthy and unexceptionable sentiments stand in stark contrast to Jesus' outburst in today's Gospel.

'Do you suppose that I am come to bring peace on earth. No, rather

division!’ And he goes on to list the various consequential fallings out in the very heart of families that will arise.

Compare this with His sayings in Matthew (12).

‘A house divided against itself cannot stand’ and

‘He that is not with me is against me’.

Contrast this with the saying in Luke (9) :

‘He that is not against us is for us’

Or the impassioned plea of His High Priestly prayer for unity in John 17

‘May they all be one – as you are in me and I am in you that the world may believe that it was you who sent me and I have loved them as you love me’.

What is going on here?

In answering the riddle of the apparently conflicting evidence the context is key.

In the Matthew 12 quote – a house divided.....he that is not with us is against us

Jesus is responding to the Pharisees sneering accusation that He is in league with the Devil. Their religiosity is not genuine but a camouflage for calumny and deceit. They are clearly against Him despite their self-advertised holiness.

In Luke 9 – He that is not against us is for us – Jesus is responding to a disciple’s complaint that a man, not of the band, was casting out devils in Jesus’ Name. He is trespassing on the franchise ! Jesus reply is to recognise that this guy is not the full deal but he is on the right side.

Don’t stop him – encourage him. Bring him on board.

Today’s passage, in Luke, ‘fire and division’, is bereft of context but mercifully we are given that missing piece of the theological jigsaw in Matthew. This warning comes in a chapter where Jesus is commissioning his disciple missionaries warning them of the opposition they will face and that the Gospel will be warmly received by some and violently

rejected by others – often within the same household.

Nothing unfamiliar there then. Jesus is being both prophetic and realistic. He knows that the Gospel will always be divisive. It's a 'make your mind up' proclamation. Choose to accept or reject.

Jesus' prayer for the Church though is supremely one of unity. Nothing disfigures the Faith and disables the mission more than division or schism. In our own domestic political life we are experiencing some of the hysterical unpleasantness of division. Divided families, character assassination, ad hominem attacks, the exchange of unworthy insults over an issue which, while it may be important for 6 months or even thirty years, will not matter tuppence in the light of eternity.

In the life of the Church division has been corrosive and immune to healing. The Great Schism of East and West, though lost in the mists of time, resulted in the abandonment of Eastern Christendom and its long subjugation to militant Islam. It has bedevilled our relations with Russia for eight centuries.

The Reformation led to a never ending splintering and subdivision of sects and ecclesial look-alikes, as each man or monarch rejected the Magisterium of the Universal Church and sought to be Pope in his own front room. Most of these excrescences bear little resemblance to the Gospel mandate and have more to do with self-justification than justification by faith. The ceaseless solemn call to ecumenism is never a call to compromise the truth or exchange genuine encounter for social comfort. It is a call to bring those who really love Jesus home to His Church. The High Priestly prayer of Christ is that we be One.

That is a call to us in our home life, in our parish life, in our diocesan life, in the life of the Universal Church. The danger of division is that it doesn't heal.

My old boss, the great Dean of St. Albans, Peter Moore once said to me,

‘Schism is always worse than heresy. Heresies come and go – old lies in new frocks – and are dealt with in each new manifestation.

Schism is the wound that never heals and disables the mission of the Church’

Jesus prayed: ‘May they all be one in us so that the world may believe’.

The credibility of the Gospel and the salvation of Man depends on our unity. Next time we get a bit shirty with those deeply irritating and utterly unreasonable members of our Christian family, we might remember that.