



HOMILY by Father Robbie Low

24<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time-Year A-September 13<sup>th</sup> 2020

***Readings: Ecclesiasticus 27: 30-28: 7, Psalm 102, Romans 14: 7-9, Matthew 18: 21-35***

Forgiveness.

Two old men. Separated by twenty years, about thirty five miles and death.

I was nineteen at the time of the first one. A non-believer. A callow youth. Omniscient, immortal and, no doubt, insufferable – so a particular thanks to those who did (suffer me).

It was high summer and I had got a job at a makeover pub in Richmond on Thames called ‘The Rising Sun’. Two huge bars, a great landlord and his Missus and a little Irish barman called Jimmy who kept a hammer behind the bar and was the ‘house security’ in case any of the alcohol – fuelled young bucks cut up rough. Apart from Jimmy and me the rest of the staff were young lovelies. Indeed my girlfriend (and later wife) worked the other bar.

The pub had undergone that most hideous of fates – Watneyfication. Never the best of beers Watneys had now gone for marketing a sort of fizzy piss, abolishing the now unnecessary pumps, in metered glasses. Thus the customer always got a glass that was not full and certainly not running over. You can imagine.

Most people got over this, after endless explanation. One man did not. An elderly, gruff, cantankerous old bird who would arrive at 6 o'clock on the dot, order half a pint of Watney's finest waste product, observe the apparent shortfall and use this as a prelude to fifty minutes of complaint about it, us, life, the world. All the bar staff tried to avoid him.

One regular 6pm I was caught in the wrong bar. 'Mr. Moan – the Grumpy Geri' hove into view. The glass was 'underfilled', the litany of criticism began. I was not in the best of moods myself. It had been a long day.

Several minutes into this catalogue of complaint against the world I had had enough. I found myself leaning over the bar and asking our valued customer a question that was not to be found in the training manual.

'Has anyone ever told you what a miserable old bugger you are?'

(In my native Cornwall, 'you old bugger' can be a term of affection. But in Richmond, Surrey, it definitely is not.)

There was 'a silence in the heavens lasting (what seemed like) half an hour'. Geri contemplated the severity of this young pup's rebuke.

This young pup contemplated a summer of unemployment.

Finally the response came. He did not want to speak to the manager.

His shoulders relaxed, he came the nearest I had seen to a smile – the muscles on his face were out of practice. His eyes began to moisten. He looked at me full on. And then he said, simply, 'You remind me of my son.'

The son, as it transpired, he had fallen out with many years ago and they had not met or spoken since. There was a hole in this man's heart that the even the finest beer in full measure could not fill.

It was a long story but we became buddies. I tried to make sure I was there to serve him every night. (The others were duly grateful). He practised on me the bits of fatherhood that had long gone rusty and I tried to make suggestions as to how the bridge might be built and how the wound be healed.

I'd like to tell you the story had a happy ending but I don't know. I went to college and 'Geri' had big decisions to make, brave risks to hazard. Fast forward twenty years. I'm 38, an Anglican priest at St. Alban's Cathedral. Visiting one of our parish – an old man, dying. A very private person. He vouched safe no personal details in the long years of his solitary attendance. After Communion we talked amidst the confusion and the pain.

He had a son. They were estranged. The son, Paul, lived abroad. He wanted to see him again before he died. He had instructed his solicitor to write to Paul asking him to visit one last time. I could have wept. The very formality would be enough to put Paul off I thought.

A week later the old man, now deteriorating fast, told me that he was hopeful of a visit any day. Though he would now be glad to be dead he would do his best to hang on for Paul and the hoped for reconciliation. With his permission I spoke to the solicitor who was cautiously optimistic. His dad was dying. Surely he would come. The days of pain became a week, a fortnight. The old man's sight had now failed. In the little turret flat he occupied, he had literally turned his face to the wall in his bed. He would hang on. But he was now *in extremis*.

I answered the call. He was turned away from me. I entered the gloom of the winter evening in the sulphurous light of an ancient bulb. He could no longer see me or hear very well. I could not bring myself to tell him that Paul would now never come. I put my hand on his shoulder and his bony fingers reached up to clasp me. As he held my hand, I heard him sigh softly, 'Paul. I knew you'd come. I've waited so long for this.'

His tortured body relaxed. I had no time to wrestle with the dilemma of truth. He died peacefully within the hour.

The real Paul, eventually, came to see the Solicitor.

These two stories came flooding back to me when I read today's Gospel narrative of the centrality of forgiveness and the desperate suffering of those who do not know how to forgive. Cut off from each other. Cut off

from God. A prison of our own construction. The terrifying loneliness of sin. With the joy of freedom, reconciliation and love just repentance, and forgiveness away.