



HOMILY by Father Robbie Low

All Saints-November 1<sup>st</sup> 2020

***Readings: Apocalypse 7: 2-4. 9-14, Psalm 23, 1 John 3: 1-3,***

***Matthew 5: 1-12***

Towards the end of 1964, with my fourteenth birthday looming and a huge amount of money saved, I bought my first guitar. The beautiful Hofner Blonde Senator Acoustic with its graceful 'f' holes, gently swollen belly and impossibly high action was an aesthetic delight and an unforgiving mistress. She cut my fingers and challenged my grip and timing but she looked great in my arms. I had mooned over her in the catalogue for months and now, at £28 from Bell Music, Surbiton, she was mine. Simultaneously I had bought my first big songbook and was desperate to play the hits but largely reduced to the ones that required only a three chord trick. At the back of the book was an old 'spiritual' entitled 'Paths of Victory'. It was slow, simple, musically achievable. Like most negro spirituals it was a song of hope in the face of unlikely facts, a declaration of trust in a God who would, despite current evidence, ensure that justice prevailed, a deep wellspring of the heart which longed for the promise of freedom and ennoblement and redemption – the literal buying out of servitude. It followed right on from the irrepressible, dignified and powerful rejection of slavery – 'No more Auction Block, Lord. No more Auction Block.' – the musical template of the great Dylan anthem, 'Blowing in the Wind'. It was simple. I could get my trembling

fingers to behave. I learnt it. As I recall now, some 56 years later, it opened thus: 'Trails of troubles, roads of battles, paths of victory I shall walk.....' It was a sombre adult version of the joyful song I had learnt at my Baptist Sunday School years earlier, 'On the victory side, on the victory side. With Christ within, the fight we'll win on the victory side.'

From very different perspectives and experiences they were both examples of Christian Triumphalism – a genre that went out no sooner had I learnt it and has stayed out for the rest of my lifetime. Which is a pity because, despite its unpopularity, it is fundamentally true.

In today's New Testament reading on this Feast of the Church Triumphant in Heaven – All Saints – we read about that great gathering of the redeemed, no longer slaves, bought with the blood of Christ and their lives given to His glory.

What are they doing? They are unembarrassedly proclaiming the victory of God

In Christ Jesus, the Lamb of the Sacrifice who has overcome sin and death and defeated the enemy of Man on the Cross.

I emphasise the word 'unembarrassedly' because, it seems to me, that too much of what used to be Western Christendom and indeed large parts of the Church are now embarrassed by 'triumphalism' in the mistaken view that this is somehow a vain boasting about ourselves. Nothing could be further from the truth. It's about the glorious triumph of the love of God and the liberation of the slave to sin.

Well, some modernists say, not much sign of victory around today. At home three men and a dog in church – and the dog's not too keen.

Christians in public office having to swear that their beliefs will in no way affect their decision making. Abroad the church persecuted bitterly by other religions while we are expected to parrot the syncretistic myth that 'one religion is pretty much as good as another'. Under atheistic

regimes, like China, that persecution is refined by a kind of officially and disgracefully approved Vichy Government of episcopal collaborators.

‘Please can we wear the clothes if we promise not to tell anyone the Good News of Jesus.’ The West has lost any interest in defending the Church at home or abroad.

If this is the smell of victory, cynics will say, I would hate to taste defeat. And there is a crippling sense of defeatism permeating the Western Church. Much of the collapse in church attendance in my lifetime can be traced, not simply to cultural change, but to this crippling lack of conviction about the victory – the removal of true triumphalism.

After all, who, in their right mind, wants to join a losing side?

The fashion for ‘issues’ and the blizzard of ‘good works’ has largely covered the silence about the Good News, the Call to repentance and the promise of salvation. Most people will have worked out that they don’t need to come to Church to give to charity, don’t think they’ve done much wrong and, to the prospect of salvation would enquire, ‘Saved from what?’ They have heard too many universalist Crem sermons about Grandad being automatically in Heaven to worry about their eternal destiny – should they believe such ‘fairy stories’.

So what is this victory and where might we find it and rejoice in it.

We look to Christ and see His reflection in these glorified human beings who are the Saints. If we examine the lives of the saints, few were rich, few powerful, few comfortable, many persecuted, many martyred, many proclaiming the Good News in very dark times – invasion, plague, war, ruin, economic collapse. What they all have in common is the conviction that Victory is won by faithfulness in the most unlikely place – outside a city wall, on a hillside, on an instrument of torture and death. No-one looking at the Calvary, on that Friday we dare to call good, would have seen VICTORY – but that, by the mysterious power of God’s love is what it was and is. The road to victory always leads through the Calvary. There is no alternative route to freedom from sin and death. There is no

other road to eternity. Our task remains, however small and unconsidered we may be, to preach the Gospel, the call to repentance, explain salvation, rescue souls.

This is the secret of the Mass which we are charged to take out into the world.

We cannot expect an easy road but it is the Glory Road.

Like the chained and exiled slave we have stood on the auction block and been redeemed by the Blood of Jesus. If we want to be with the great company of saints, who cheer us on, then we must have the faith to proclaim that victory whatever the cost.

Trails of troubles, roads of battles – Paths of Victory we shall walk.