

Dear Friends,

I once read an historical novel with the ominous title *Come Rack! Come Rope!* It was set in Elizabethan times when merely to be a Catholic priest in this country was an act of high treason, and people who tried to keep up the old faith could face dire penalties. It must have been like living in a police state, when you never knew when the knock on the door was coming and what it might lead to.

The central character in the story is called Robin (!). As it begins he is looking forward to marrying his childhood sweetheart, but both she and he are from devout Catholic families, and Marjorie encourages him to think that instead of marrying her he should go abroad to train for the priesthood, and then come back to minister to their families and other Catholics in their native Derbyshire. This he does, and for a while manages to avoid capture, but inevitably he is arrested and the title tells you what happens to him.

I was thinking of this story last week when I had the opportunity to say Mass in an historic setting, a country house in Essex called Ingatestone Hall. The family who owned the house from Elizabethan times were Catholics, but somehow they managed to stay out of trouble. They did have priests visiting to celebrate in their private chapel, but kept them safe by disguising them as members of the household. The house has two priests' holes, secret chambers where priests could hide, but the present owner of the house who showed us round said that probably they never had to be used. The family were either too canny or just lucky in escaping persecution, though the head of the family was a skilful diplomat, who made himself indispensable to the state as a major civil servant, and so was spared investigation of his religious beliefs.

The family supported the famous composer William Byrd, who lived in the area and was also a Catholic, and we had a group of singers with us to perform some of his music for the Mass. It was altogether a special occasion on a warm summer day in the country - especially after driving round the M25 to get there amid dozens of huge thundering lorries! It seemed such a quiet peaceful retreat, and it was pleasing to think that at least one Catholic household was able to carry on its faith unmolested for so long in this remote corner.

The gatehouse at the entrance to the estate showed the motto of the Petre family - *Sans Dieu Rien*. This could mean, 'Without God there is nothing,' or perhaps 'Without God we are nothing, or we have nothing.' It certainly indicates how dependent we are on God the creator for everything we are and everything we have, and I think it must have been knowing that if we trust in God he will give us all we need that kept the family going through the many dark days they would have had to endure. Above all it is the body and blood of Christ in the Mass that focuses all the ways that God feeds and nourishes us, giving us the strength to continue our journey towards him.

It was the same trust and faith that supported Elijah in the straits he was reduced to in the desert, as we hear in the first reading of this Sunday's Mass. I wrote about Elijah recently on the 18th July and will not repeat what I said then, but you can look it up if you want to. The

desert is a good place to get to know oneself, as many people have found throughout the ages: being hot and dry, empty and barren, it cuts us back to the basics and helps us to realise that we do have very little that we can call our own, but that God is always with us wherever we are and will always be God who knows us and loves us through and through.

I remember being attracted by the prospect of a retreat with fasting in the desert of New Mexico, that was offered during the Millennium Year 2,000. In the event I did not go to New Mexico, but did make a retreat that year in Norfolk, which is not at all like the desert, quite the reverse - a rich, fertile agricultural county. But it was called a *desert retreat*, a format devised by a religious sister I knew, who had the idea of a retreat in which there would be minimal content - no reading, no talks, no sacraments even; just a daily time of what she called "faith-sharing," in which those taking part could say what they believed was happening in their retreat. I have found this to be a good experience, especially for that sense that if we have God - and we do! - we literally have everything, even if we seem to have nothing.

Things can happen in our lives that make us think we are alone in a desert or wilderness. It is not a comfortable place to be, but it has something vital to teach us, and so we can embrace even our times in the wilderness knowing that God is there too and will always be with us in all things.

Wishing you every blessing, Fr. Robin.