

3 Easter  
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### **“God’s Bandit!”**

In a few weeks time, a new movie will come out called “Robin Hood.” It will be the latest in a long line of movies with that title going back to Errol Flynn in the 1939 version with the great Olivia De Haviland.

The latest version of Robin Hood stars Russell Crowe and will more than likely, have every technological and special effects trick imaginable. Exploding arrows, magical forests, but still basically ‘men in tights’ swinging through the trees, and blonde Saxon girls imprisoned in towers.

While Roy Rogers and Gene Audrey were copied by kids at play in the 1950’s here in the States, in England we cut down branches, made bow and arrows and went to war with each other in the woods of England. Next month a whole new generation of young English kids will do the same, because Robin Hood is a classic story of good triumphing over evil, right over wrong and the power of the little man to overcome adversity. So, for a few months at least playing Robin Hood will be ‘cool’ again.

I tell you all this by way of introducing you to St Paul and our first reading from the Acts of the Apostles. To all of us who for years belonged to the Merry Men, the comparisons are obvious.

“Saul a rich young nobleman is sent away to college in a foreign land; there after many adventures; he becomes the bad guy persecuting the poor and the goodies. Everything Paul has set out to achieve he has accomplished.

At a young age he is a lawyer, Pharisee, expert in O.T. law, a Philosopher and is fluent in Latin, Arabic, Hebrew, and Greek. More, Paul is a rising star in Jewish government with family connections, which make him a Roman citizen.

Don’t you have the feeling that you do not really know enough about Paul? I mean one minute you are the hottest young scholar in Judaism with a brighter future than the young David, the next you have run off to live in a ghetto with a bunch of weirdo Christ following freaks.

Paul turns himself, overnight into an outlaw, an untouchable, someone outside Judaism. He is expelled from the Pharisee party, he is barred from practicing Jewish law. He can no longer teach Old Testament scripture. He cannot even marry a good Jewish girl, raise a family and live happily ever after.

For the next 30 years, Paul has no home, no house of his own. He never again returns to his home in Tarsus. Never sees his parents again. He does not marry or have anything he would call his own.

Scholars studying Paul and his letters over the last two thousand years can tell us little about him apart from: the fact that he is brilliant; he is a scholar; Paul makes sense of everything, especially the Old Testament and how it prepared the way for Jesus. But, they also tell us that Paul is fanatical, crazy, driven, possessed by his faith and belief in Jesus. Jesus is everything. Jesus is risen. He wants to tell the whole world. He is obsessed with getting out the story. He is oblivious to danger. No one can live with Paul. No one can keep up with him. No one even likes him, especially the other Apostles. He fights with all of them. James he cannot stand. Peter he thinks is a softie always sitting on the fence. He burns partners out . Barnabas, Silas, Mark. Luke, Titus, none of them can keep up with him. When any of them or the Apostles reaches a town, Paul has already been there. The Romans hate him. The Jews hire assassins to rub him out. At times, he even writes that he does not like himself. He is the Robin Hood of his era.

Deep in his heart is the conviction that Paul has found the secret code that unlocks all Jewish history and all Jewish writings. He knows that Jesus is the Messiah. The new David, the Savior promised from of old . For Paul, Jesus is life and anyone who touches the flame of that life giving Spirit will live forever.

When you read the Gospel today, you read what you have expected to hear in this 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Easter. Jesus appears to the Apostles again. It is by the Sea of Galilee, so there is a miraculous catch of fish again. Jesus asks Peter three times if he loves him, more than the rest. Jesus tells the Apostles; "feed my lambs, feed the poor, tell my story and you will all die doing it."

This is the beginning of the Christian church. It is the Apostles and the disciples closest to Jesus who are told and experience all this and it is they who should fill the pages of the Acts of the Apostles and go out to proclaim what Jesus has mandated.

But, that is not what happens. For most of the rest of the 1<sup>st</sup> century, the Apostles and disciples are hardly mentioned. Instead, it is Paul, who takes Jesus' words literally and he goes out to bring them to every person and to every place. He is thinking: "You want me to catch fish. I will catch souls for you. You want me to feed your sheep. I will feed an empire with your story that you are the total salvation of our God; you are the hope of hopes; you are the life of resurrection."

Paul is the man who takes the hopes, dreams and promises of the young Jesus and challenges the young Christian church to make Christ's vision a reality and build God's Kingdom on earth.

No one else could have done this other than Paul. Not Peter, or the loveable John, only Paul. Little wonder down the centuries that he has been called: "God's Bandit."

With boundless energy and a deep abiding faith, he dragged the kicking, screaming Christian community to birth. He rages against injustice and hypocrisy, denouncing those who would reject the gentiles. He cried the loudest that Christ judged no one but came that all mighty be saved and walk in God's grace.

He boasts of his imprisonments in Christ's name. Of the times, he was flogged and whipped for his faith. He counts the many times he was ship wrecked and the greater amount of times he was stoned and driven out of towns. And at the last, Paul rushes towards Rome and his own death, perhaps longing to be with his Christ for whom he has given everything.

For us too, life is about loss. Like Christ and Paul, we give up much, to gain everything. All our efforts, are for others, the feed my sheep of the Gospel. In this last week, Larry Grosso was seriously ill. Daniel Evanchik dies and passed to his eternal reward. In Tennessee Oscar Rankin spends his final days with his family. However, we are not down hearted, because like Paul we know that like a river rushing to the sea, we are all rushing to the glory of God's Kingdom. Thomas Moore that great English Saint had these words written on his tomb: "Till we merrily meet in heaven."

If like Paul we too would be bandits for Christ then let us do it merrily.  
Amen+