

On this day of days, Thursday 9 October, we gather for what is truly important: that's right, the day of the House Music has finally arrived. Last Friday the draw was made in this very basilica, drumroll and all. And what are the chances that the two houses named after saints would be drawn to sing first, and on their saints' day? Well, there's a one-in-ten chance, as any A-Level mathematician should tell you: there are ten ways of choosing two houses from five. Think about it.

Not only are Barlow and Roberts singing one after the other this evening; this term, at those times when we have met in this holy place, we have witnessed a permutation of pews, a reshuffle of rows, a changing of the chairs. As one senior student of Roberts put it, they have: *crossed over to the dark side*. Yes, behind Abbot Philip de Caverel's house we find a unity of saintly Benedictine voices. Now, Barlow and Roberts houses not only sing from the same hymn sheet, but on the same side at Hymn Practice and Mass.

It's funny how something as small as swapping sides, as Roberts House has done this term, can say something rather large about discipleship. To *cross over* is what every saint must do, changing from self-seeking, to self-giving. St John and St Ambrose crossed over from the safety of their monastery to the danger of the mission field. St John Roberts was the first to do so. As one wise housemaster said: *crossing over to the dark side means sharing our light*.

So, Barlow and Roberts houses, you'll sing first tonight. But that raises a question: **is being first always best?** In the Gospels, the Lord has a habit of turning our normal order upside down. *The last shall be first and the first shall be last* he says. In the Christian life, the way up is the way down. The way to glory is through humility.

At school we sometimes worry about being first; first in line, first to finish a test, first to get lunch or brunch, first to leave Mass. Of course, being first isn't always best. Remember Judas Iscariot, the original person who left Mass first. It didn't turn out well; note that Downside has no Judas house, or Iscariot corridor. Perhaps, then, there's wisdom and a dignity in waiting, in letting another go before you. Jesus says in today's Gospel: *If anyone would follow me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will save it.*

This is the paradox Roberts and Barlow lived and died by. They were not first in the eyes of the world; poor, hunted, imprisoned, condemned; but in the eyes of heaven they were crowned first among the saints of St Gregory's. They took up their cross daily, in the quiet choices of being faithful and serving others. Even to the extent of accepting the ultimate sacrifice. As Jesus said; *greater love has no man/woman, that to lay down his/her life for his/her friends.*

Why would someone accept suffering and martyrdom? As one Caverel student reminded us during Lectio recently, Romans 8:18 says: *The sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.* It puts into perspective the difficulties of this life, knowing there is great joy to come. But we don't only suffer to get to heaven. Suffering and self-sacrifice have value, not because pain is good, but because love is. When we bear difficulty for the sake of another, we share in Christ's redeeming love. It's the hidden glory of the Christian life: losing ourselves to find ourselves.

That's what our opening hymn puts so well: *O Saint John Roberts, servant of the poor, mercy and courage marked your life secure; faithful in danger, fearless unto death, You gave your life with Christ's own parting breath.* And, for balance; *Saint Ambrose Barlow, steadfast, true, and kind, shepherd of souls with single heart and mind.*

So as we pray today for the houses that bear their names, let's remember what it truly means to go first. It means to lead by love, to suffer patiently, to give oneself away.

And when, at the end of this Mass, Isabella's royal patroness and Caverel's pontifical majesty file out first for lunch, leading the sons of Roberts, Smythe and Barlow, Old Gregorians three, we'll remember that in God's kingdom the true procession is reversed. Those who were last on earth, humble and hidden, are first in heaven.

I'm no prophet; but maybe this evening at House Music the first shall be last, and the last shall be first. And tonight, when Barlow and Roberts houses take to the stage first, they may well suffer; but it will be a noble suffering, for their namesakes suffered first: they put themselves last, went first to their deaths, and so opened the way for us to follow. May their witness remind us that every act of self-sacrifice, however small, is a note in heaven's eternal hymn. Let's pray using the words on the back of your Mass leaflet.

**St John Roberts and St Ambrose Barlow; pray for us.**