



HOMILY by Father Robbie Low

3rd Sunday of Lent Year A

The Woman of Samaria

Readings: *Genesis 12: 1-4, Ps 32, 2 Timothy 1: 8-10, Matthew 17: 1-9*

Today's Gospel is huge. Not simply in its size but in its implications.

A preacher can, within the necessary constraints of the Mass, only dwell on a particular aspect. I want, therefore to look at the lessons for our evangelistic outreach that are contained in this extraordinary account.

Jesus is in foreign territory, Samaria.

The rift between Jew and Samaritan is centuries old and goes back to the historic fault line in Solomon's kingdom which was to lead to the division of the land, the secession of the ten tribes and the end of Israel as a coherent state. You don't have dealings with Samaritans and they don't have dealings with you.

Next, Jesus is alone with a woman. She is, as we discover, unmarried and with a track record that means she comes to the well at a time when the other women are not there. You don't speak to women unchaperoned. You don't greet her never mind seek her hospitality and engage her in personal conversation. No wonder the disciples are shocked when they return.

Jesus is breaking with human conventions and social laws, because, as the Word of God Incarnate, He operates under a supreme law, indeed the law

which concludes the Canon Law of the Catholic Church: 'The supreme law of the Church is the salvation of souls' (Canon 1752). Jesus' intention here is evangelistic and it is universal.

So there are vast amounts to learn from this encounter and I can only point to a few key 'headlines'.

First of all Jesus does initially not offer her anything. HE asks her for a favour. Can she do something for Him. Why do I draw your attention to this simple fact? Because I have noticed, down many years, that people are often drawn to Christ because someone has invited them to use their talent or gift in the service of His Body, the Church. My first parish priest used to ask men to help him with practical jobs on the church building. Once they had dug a new drain, got ladders up to do a ceiling repair, mended the electrics, it became their church and not a few of them stayed to find out about Jesus.

We know, as Jesus will shortly tell the Samaritan woman, that Christ has vastly more to give than we can give Him but he honours us and this woman by asking for our help. When we evangelise people we sometimes forget that God has given them gifts and we might usefully open our evangelism by inviting them to use them, to help. Of course we must not neglect what Christ has to offer them but His opening gambit to the woman at the well is a request. Can you help me?

The second thing is that He is interested in her story. Although He knows it because of His spiritual insight, it is important for the woman to tell her story to Jesus. It is not a glorious one, it is not one of which she is proud but it is hers. She is not afraid to tell the truth.

When we encounter people whom we hope to introduce to Jesus, it is good for us to listen to their story. They are not simply potential 'Mass fodder'. They are, each and every one, unique creations of God and they have a story. Only if we know their story can we begin to relate them to Jesus who knows everything about them. We represent Jesus and He has time for everyone's story.

A man I know once responded to an invitation to join RCIA course. When he arrived he wanted to tell the group how he had come to the Catholic Faith. The woman leading it told him that there was no time for that as she had too much to get through. He felt unwelcome and the Church never heard his testimony. He never went back and both he and the Church are the poorer.

Listen to the story. The Church wants her children to come home. She welcomes them, whatever their wounds. She wants to hear their story and offer them new and eternal life.

Finally, watch how Jesus deals with distraction. The woman suddenly realises how personal this has become. Jesus appears to know her entire life and is still engaged with her. She makes a familiar retreat. 'You're a Catholic. I go to a different church. Let's get away from the personal and talk about denominations.'

Jesus does not get involved in denominational comparisons and time-wasting claptrap. He affirms that the orthodox faith is the truth but He goes even deeper to the very heart of the worship of God. He is quite forthright, 'You worship what you do not know – i.e. your religion is only partial. –we worship what we know – the full truth of the Catholic Faith.'

Nevertheless what God is looking for is not labels but real worship – spirit and truth – to participate in the full nature of God which is revealed in Christ. The source and summit of that is the Mass where Christ Himself is truly revealed and invites our little troubled and brief humanity, via repentance and the Cross of Calvary, into the divinity and eternity of God. The woman offers Jesus a drink. Jesus offers her eternity.

In the mission, on which He has sent us, we represent Jesus and that is what and who we are about.

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