



HOMILY by Father Robbie Low

3rd Sunday of Lent Year A

The Water of Life

Readings: *Exodus 17:3-7, Ps 94, Romans 5:1-2, 5-8, John 4: 5-42*

With such a long and fascinating Gospel account this morning you would undoubtedly feel short changed if there was not a long and forensically detailed reflection on it in the homily. Prepare for disappointment.

The truth is I have heard sermons on this text which have majored on 'Jesus' attitude to women' (Jesus the radical feminist is not a subject that seems to have cropped up in Dame Jenni Murray's daily party political broadcast).

Others have concentrated on 'Jesus' attitude to the foreigner' – let's not talk about immigration. Some have discoursed on 'Jesus and the multi-faith society' – successive governments' policy so must be OK. 'Jesus and divorce' - what can you do? 'Jesus and cohabitation' - everybody else seems to be doing it so better not say anything. It's probably just a matter of time before someone preaches this Gospel on Jesus' attitude to lunchtime drinking.

Today I want to look simply at what we can learn from this story about our most pressing need as a church. How to evangelise.

The first thing to notice about this encounter is that it is a one to one. This is not preaching to a crowd but a simple conversation with another soul. We

should always remember that most people will never put themselves in the way of a sermon, however remarkable, but they will listen to another person who engages them in the midst of their daily business.

The second thing is that Jesus doesn't initially tell the Samaritan woman what He can do for her. On the contrary, He asks her to do something for Him. This is important. I remember the old priest in the village I lodged in while at college. He noticed that very few men came to church. So, whenever he had a practical job that needed doing he would invite one of the men to help him. The church they had been so nervous about entering suddenly became their church and the womenfolk began to see their men standing next to them in the pews. Sometimes simply asking for help, showing our need of them, can be a way back for the lapsed and an open door for those who have never been. Whenever I come across a lapsed person, I always tell them that they are missed and how much the home team needs them.

The third thing is to see how Jesus deals with the barriers. She is a woman, she is alone, she is of the enemy race. We need to understand how dramatic this is. For a man to try to shake the hand of an orthodox Jewish woman even today is anything from a faux pas to a grave insult. Similarly with Islam. Jesus puts his request and his offer in the context of God's generosity. This is something higher than social convention or gender niceties. Jesus talks a bit of theology. The woman brings His high flown symbolism down to earth with a very practical observation. He can offer nothing. The well is woman's work and a man without a bucket is useless. But His offer is intriguing. She imagines she will never have the tedious job

of drawing water from the well and dragging it back into town. So she asks Jesus for this remarkable thirst quenching gift.

Having ignored social convention, Jesus then employs it. He asks her to bring her husband. This is wise on several counts. First of all it will stop the kind of jealousy that some men get if their wives become religious. But it also gives her a chance to tell her story. She has no husband. Jesus knows that there is a reason why she is at the well on her own at the most inconvenient hour. She is a bit of a social outcast and, in marital terms, a hazard to shipping. But it is important that her story is told before she can commit. In evangelisation we bring the story of the Gospel but we always need to hear the story of the people we encounter. Listening to their journey is part of leading them to Jesus.

Having been embarrassed by the revelation of her unhappy story the woman then turns to the next line of defence. She starts to talk about church. You are a Catholic but I was brought up a Methodist, a Muslim, a Marxist, a Buddhist, a Baptist, a Bahai. Let's talk about the difference in our religious practices. Let's do comparative religion and de-personalise this. Jesus is not playing that game.

Many religious people have sought God but, while acknowledging their quest, we should never cede ground. The Christian Faith of the Universal Church is the only sacramental certainty we have and the only indisputable highway of salvation. To compromise this truth is to cheat people out of the mercy of God.

Jesus tells her the unvarnished truth. There is a way to be fully reconciled. There is a way to put your life right. There is an inexhaustible source of refreshment through the water of life, baptised in Christ. There is a way back into the family of faith. Water of life NOT watered down Christianity. There is heaps more but let me summarise:

- 1) Your one to one encounters in everyday life are the key mission field
- 2) Asking people to help is often an important pre-evangelism step.
Replace fear of faith with a familiarity of friendship and sense of value. People seldom come alone. They need to be accompanied.
- 3) The Gospel takes precedence over social convention but does not seek to be offensive. The evangelist (you) is not afraid to be in uncomfortable places at odd times with unlikely people.
- 4) Never be afraid to offer what Jesus promises.
It's not your promise, it's His.
- 5) Listen to the other person's story. Don't crowd it out with your own story. Don't promise to solve their problems.
Do bring them to Jesus. That's His job.
- 6) Don't get into 'churchy' talk – it's a diversionary tactic of the enemy.
Never compromise the Gospel of the Catholic Church. You and I may not be very good disciples but we do know the full revelation of God's truth and we must never sell people short.
- 7) Finally, look at what happens next. The Samaritan woman is so thrilled to know that, although Jesus knows all about her wretched failures, He has sought her out, included her and offered her the way home. **SO SHE RUNS BACK TO EVANGELISE THE WHOLE TOWN**
The best evangelisers are those who have been evangelised.