



HOMILY by Father Robbie Low

3rd Sunday of Lent Year A

Woman at the Well

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

In a couple of weekends time we will be celebrating the Feast of the Annunciation, the moment when God risked His entire plan of the salvation of Man on the gamble that Mary would respond to His mysterious and shocking proposal. After that Mass we will go into a two and a half hour workshop given by the Dept of Evangelisation entitled 'Soul Listening'. The juxtaposition is not accidental. Our Lady's ability to respond to God, to become the place of revelation, to accept the gift of the Incarnation, to be the one who presents Christ to the world, depends on her capacity for Soul Listening – of being open to the Word and the moment and the Call and the opportunity. If we are to respond to God's call to respond to His call to salvation in Christ and consequently take seriously our duty to present Christ to others- to evangelise – then we need to develop this skill and charism.

Today's Gospel has some simple tips for our discernment and practice in sharing the Good News of Jesus Christ. That it is a significant story in the ministry of Jesus is attested by its extraordinary length. It occupies nearly 5 % of the text of John's Gospel.

It finds Jesus in traditional 'enemy' territory, the Samaritan heartland, the rival claimants to the holy tradition, the breakaway state from the post Solomonic disaster of ruinous kingship. It sees Jesus transgressing the prevailing customs by being in conversation with one of the enemy. By being alone with a woman and, as it turns out, a woman of a distinctly dodgy reputation.

His encounter with her is full of lessons for our approach to the unconverted, unconvinced, rebel heart of Man.

It is not an accident that Jesus finds Himself at the Well and alone. Jesus knows His subject. No-one would come at noon to the well unless they were social outcasts. So He is going to meet a very lonely person. He needs to meet her alone, regardless of the rules, because there are things that people will not talk about in public – usually their deepest wounds and failures. Meeting in a group people can fob it off, make light of things, evade the issues.

It is not an accident that Jesus chooses, as the agent of His evangelism, a social outcast, an unlikely messenger. He knows – and He has told us – that the sick need a doctor not the well and the one who is forgiven most usually loves most. This lady's life, as the encounter unfolds, turns out to be pretty disordered.

Let's just look at a few headline details of Jesus evangelistic technique here.....

First of all He meets her alone. No-one else is coming to the well at this time of day. But , before the Safeguarding Officer reminds me that this is not good practice, let us note that it is not in a secret hidey hole. Anyone could be there at any time. There is a point to the aloneness because we all know that we can behave very differently

when other people are around to observe. In a One to one there is no hiding and little temptation to subterfuge. We are more likely to be ourselves. (I recall at the beginning of my ministry – long before there was a breath of the tidal wave of scandals that would ensue – a wise mentor said that I should always be in a situation where others were near or able to come and go so that there was no suspicion of naughtiness or opportunity for false accusation. I thought him faintly bonkers at the time but always kept his advice.) So ALONE is more productive of real encounter and no disguises.

Then, let us note, Jesus does not weigh in with a heavy dose of the benefits of following Him. Indeed instead of offering the woman something, He asks for something from her. He wants a drink. She has the bucket.

I first saw this simple truth worked out in the little village where I lived fifty years ago. The vicar noticed that the church was attended by a few faithful women and hardly any men. The church needed a lot of practical work done. One by one he invited the men to do a bit of electrics, a modicum of plumbing, hedging, ditching, repointing etc etc. Men who had previously regarded the church as ‘for women and children’ and who never thought of themselves as ‘spiritual’, came to see this as ‘their church’ and began to accompany their womenfolk to worship.

Inviting someone to be of help is often an embarrassing entry point for them.

The next thing we might notice is that Jesus has an advantage over us. He already knows about this woman. Granted but..... as you will

discover as you listen to the other person. –and this is the key – if they sense that you are a compassionate listener (both to God and to them) it will not be long before they will be sharing the details of their lives with you in what must be a sacred trust. This is at the heart of ‘Spiritual listening’. We are not there to glean gossip or tittle tattle but to assist one another on the journey. That is a privileged position and one we earn by trust.

One more point worth noting here. The moment the conversation goes ‘deep’, the woman momentarily panics and retreats to the diversionary tactic of ‘church’. You are a Catholic I’m C of E /Methodist/whatever – let’s talk about churchmanship. Jesus is not for the turning. He simply asserts the Faith. We can gently do the same. We belong to the original most ancient church in unbroken line from the APOSTLES AND THE TEACHING OF CHRIST. WE DO NOT TALK ABOUT DENOMINATIONALISM OR LOOKALIKES. WE ARE TO CONCENTRATE ON THE SOUL IN HAND, THE PERSON, THE OBJECT OF CHRIST’S LOVE. IT’S PERSONAL – LET’S NOT PERMIT IT TO DESCEND INTO THE INSTITUTIONAL. KEEP IT ABOUT THE PERSON AND ABOUT JESUS.

There is a huge amount more to this extraordinary story of encounter but no time here in Mass today. Let this be a taster for our morning together on Soul Listening on 25 h March when we celebrate the great Soul Listener, The Blessed Virgin Mary, on the Feast of the Annunciation.