

## Homily for The Third Sunday of Lent (Year A)(15/03/20)

This Sunday we are meeting for Mass in extraordinary times. All of us are feeling unsettled, and anxious. Some people are worried about their own health, or the health of people that they love; others are worried about their businesses, or their jobs and livelihoods. None of us knows when it will all end and we will get back to normal, or indeed whether or not there will ever be a return to normal. Those of us who like things to be predictable and clear are left not knowing what will be happening from one day to the next. It is a time of great anxiety.

And in the middle of all this anxiety, the Church's liturgy carries on, and puts before us the story of the Samaritan woman. It is a long story, in which nothing happens. It is the story of a conversation between Jesus and a woman he meets by chance. What does this conversation that took place some two thousand years ago have to say to us in a time of great anxiety?

This woman meets Jesus, by chance. At the time of their meeting her life is pretty rubbish. She has had five husbands, and the man she is with now is not even a husband. She has been so rejected by the people of the town that the only time she dares to come to the well is the time that she knows she won't bump into anyone. There will be no disapproving stares, no cutting comments, no turned backs because she has come in the middle of the day when the sun is at its hottest and sensible people are in the shade. But there is someone there, and this person speaks to her. More than that, he speaks deeply and clearly into her need. He knows that she is a Samaritan, people despised by the Jews; he knows that her personal life is deeply flawed. But he doesn't take the moral high ground with her, he doesn't tell her what she ought to be doing: his need speaks to her need, and tired and thirsty as he is he asks for her help: 'Give me a drink'. Someone who most people would despise and turn away from, he asks for help. We find it so easy to judge people, so easy to mark them down as 'good' or as 'bad' and our behaviour towards them is based on that alone: do they seem to me good, or bad? But Jesus speaks to this woman just as another human being, a person who is troubled and needy and frightened and alone. His piercing gaze sees through all the externals, and with four words he gives her back her humanity. Someone has noticed her and, in spite of knowing who and what she is, has asked her for help, has treated her as an equal. He sees her need very clearly and before she herself has spoken a word he has answered it. This talk of living water is saying this: the meeting between Christ and this woman is a life-giving encounter. Her life is made better. He sees her, he knows her, he loves her, and in this he gives her life.

Today we come to the well, and as always Christ is waiting for us. Our needs are different from the needs of this woman, but he looks at us, sees into our souls, and loves us. Like the woman at the well, he sees our needs and he loves us for that need, loves us in that anxiety, loves us in that fear. We do not know where this time will take us, but this all-seeing love of Christ is absolute and nothing can shake it. What words might he be speaking into our need? All I can do is tell you something about how he is speaking to me in my anxiety and uncertainty.

First of all, I am very sure that the Lord wants as far as possible to free us from anxiety (as we pray that he will at the end of the Lord's Prayer). It is normal to be anxious in times such as this, but there is a difference between a healthy anxiety that keeps us alert and careful and a pathological one that takes over our lives. The first is life-giving, the second is life destroying. We are surrounded by so much information, with news that is updated by

the minute and everyone has an opinion. Modern media needs clicks, so it is presented in a way that keeps us hooked. That's fair enough, but it can make us obsessive so maybe we need to free ourselves from this and say we will not let this take over our lives. We will look at it from time to time, but less and less, or it will paralyse us and prevent us doing anything. And there is no shortage of opinions, but not all opinions are equal. So perhaps we need to ask ourselves if this person giving an opinion is an expert in what they are talking about? Is what they are saying making my life better? If not, then perhaps we need to switch off the opinions. I am with the ever-wise Flannery O'Connor who once said: 'I hate to deliver opinions. On most things I don't deserve an opinion and on a lot of things I simply don't have an opinion.' (The Habit of Being p 525). That is a great lesson for our age.

Then there are those lovely words of Etty Hillesum, waiting to be arrested and murdered by the Nazis, who writes a letter to God telling him how she is feeling, which begins 'Dear God, these are anxious times..' That is enough to get us hooked. She goes on to say that she knows she must at all costs defend and protect the place inside where God dwells (which is another great lesson for us, when we are tempted to worry about so many other things), and then she says 'Let me use and spend every minute and turn this into a fruitful day, one stone more in the foundations on which to build our so uncertain future....I am beginning to feel a little more peaceful, God, thanks to this conversation with you' (Etty – A Diary 1941-3 p 198).

These are anxious times, but we can choose to make them more anxious, or less. We can distance ourselves from those things that disturb us unnecessarily, and decline to be a part of the hysteria of the crowd, which is not life-giving for anyone. Perhaps each of us needs to write a letter to God, telling him how we feel, and we might find some healing in that.

We have come to the well, and have found a Saviour. He wants to throw a blanket of his love over our troubled hearts. We can choose to accept the paralysis of fear and anxiety; or we can dive into a meaningless quest to surround ourselves with physical things; or we can make a decision to build up the things that might help get us out of this mess, and which we will certainly need to rebuild things after it has passed: this is no time to build walls around ourselves, this is a time to build relationships, to depend on one another more honestly, more wholly, more openly. We need each other more than ever, we need to be Christ for one another, to speak words of calm and love and gentleness into the furore of fear and irrationality. Even if we cannot be physically with one another, we need to build a stronger and stronger spiritual bond of affection.

Who knows where this will all lead. My real dream is that it will leave us closer to one another: more loving, more engaged, more open. There is work to be done, and probably no-one but us to do it. When faced with the crisis of human sinfulness, Jesus deployed the only weapon that can defeat crisis: sacrifice. That has always been, and always will be, true. In every time of crisis it is those who have made sacrifices that have turned despair into hope. Not taking risks, other than the risk of love, but giving of ourselves for the sake of one another. And why should we not make those words of Etty Hillesum our own, and make each day a day in which we make other people's lives better, make the world more ready to be a better world when all this is past? Why should we not be beacons of hope, apostles of affection, signs of a future that is bright?

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