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## A homily for the 3rd Sunday of Lent

**Date:** Sunday, March 15, 2020 | **Season:** Lent | **Year:** A
**First Reading:** Exodus 17:3–7
**Responsorial Psalm:** Psalm 95:1–2, 6–9 | **Response:** Psalm 95:8
**Second Reading:** Romans 5:1–2, 5–8
**Gospel Acclamation:** John 4:42, 15
**Gospel Reading:** John 4:5–42, 4:5–15, 19b–26, 39a, 40–42
**Preached at:** the Chapel of St Andrew's School for Girls in Bedfordview **in the** Archdiocese of Johannesburg, South Africa**.**

We've been making this journey during Lent where we've been asked to travel with Jesus into parched deserts and climb-up and down mountain-tops – and to-day our first reading is again in a desert where the Israelites, having escaped slavery in Egypt, are grumbling, so Moses asks God to give them water to quench their thirst, which he does.

In the Gospel we are transported to that wonderful scene with the Samaritan woman at the well. In those days the well was the source of communal water, the very center of life for a community.

For just as we heard in the 1st reading, like the Israelites in the desert, we know we cannot live without water. We also cannot live without love, and as St Paul re-minded us in the 2nd reading that, like living water, "the love of God has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us." But not everyone is immediately aware of God's love for them, as the Gospel shows.

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There are several things happening in this Gospel story, please allow me to just elaborate on three of them:

The first is that Jesus obviously sought this woman out. He could have travelled from Judea to Galilee another way, but he chose to go through Samaria. And he is alone because at this stage his disciples have left Him to go in search of food, even though later Jesus will say he has food they do not comprehend. So Jesus is resting at this well, and we're then told that the Samaritan Woman arrives and Jesus initiates contact.

Let's remember that she is an outcast even among her own people but He does not wait for her to approach him. If she had her way, she probably would have wanted to avoid everyone – which is why she is there in the midday heat instead of in the cool of the morning when the other women from the town would be collecting water. But Jesus still engages her. He starts a conversation with her. He asks her questions. He listens to what she says. He lets her explain who she is, and what she believes, and, importantly, what she needs and desires. And Jesus listens and then offers her living water, which we know to mean more than just water, but eternal life.

I think the point is that Jesus goes to the frontiers and beyond, to the outcasts, and he does not preach or condemn; he engages, he encounters, he listens and he reveals himself to her. He crosses borders and encounters her where she is, as she is. He does not talk at her, or about her, but he has a conversation with her. Too often in our Church and in the world, we continue to ostracize people and talk about them. Either in superior tones or as mere statistics. As Pope Francis says, we focus too much on making distinctions about adjectives, instead of appreciating nouns. First and foremost we are all children of God, made in his image and likeness. We need to go outside of our established circles and to encounter people and listen to what they say about their lives. Because that's where Jesus is – with the supposed outcast, where they are.

There's more to say about that but I think we should notice, because it might not seem strange to us in 2020 – but it was really strange to anyone at that time – and this is my second point, that Jesus is also breaking a taboo, in fact he's

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breaking three taboos.

Firstly, he spoke to her despite the fact that she was a woman. In those days, for a man to speak to a woman who was not his wife, daughter, sister or mother, was highly suspect.

Secondly, she was a Samaritan woman, and the Jews traditionally despised Samaritans.

And, thirdly, he asked her to get him a drink of water, even though just using a cup or jar that she would have touched would have made him ceremonially unclean.

My first and the second points are related. It's not enough to just go out and listen and engage with the world, but we also have to interrogate the taboos of our time and ask what would Jesus do in the face of such taboos. We still have too many taboos in the Church. Divorce and Remarriage, the whole issue of Gender, LGBTI…, there are many who feel outcast, and moreover, are made to feel as outcasts for circumstances beyond their control, but Jesus isn't letting religion get in the way of a relationship with the Father. He's offering living water and creating new possibilities of inclusion, new spaces for worship where all are welcome. Can we join Jesus in this mission?

But the third thing that is happening in this story is that during the course of the conversation, Jesus reveals himself to her and we see her faith develop.

She moves from being antagonistic towards him as a Jew, to seeing him as a Jewish prophet, the Messiah, and finally bestowing on him the exalted title that Roman Emperors, from Julius Caesar to Hadrian, claimed for themselves, 'Saviour of the World'. We can see her encounter on two levels: personally, and as a representative for all Samaritans, or whoever is 'Other' in our life.

Personally, her encounter with Jesus made her see herself and her life, and her relationship with God, more clearly, and she wanted to share that vision of Good News with everyone – even the people who had previously been unkind to her.

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As a representative, her personal history with five husbands can be seen to parallel her nation's history of colonization by five nations and their substitution of a foreign religion.

Some scripture scholars argue that her current situation with a sixth person might represent Samaria's colonial experience with the Roman empire and the imperial cult. But her conversion of the Samaritan townspeople shows that Jesus fulfills and surpasses their national hopes. Because of her testimony the Samaritans move beyond a form of worship tainted by charges of idolatry to a true worship of God; and beyond a national identity defined by colonial powers to become true people of God, in direct relationship: beyond the confines of borders, race and ethnicity; beyond the unfreedoms of colonialism and inheritance; towards the free choice of beloved children of God, summoned by a Saviour not of a single tribe or kingdom, but of the whole world, desirous to save everyone in it. Everyone!

I hesitate to talk about teenage boys in a girls school, but Tom Wright tells the story of how a young teenager announces to his mother that he's decided to become a Christian. His mother is alarmed, as she thinks this means he's joined some kind of cult. 'They've brainwashed you!' she says. But he replied: 'If you'd seen what was in my brain, you'd realize it needed washing!'

Of course, he hadn't been brainwashed. He had encountered Christ. What happened was something we all, I hope, can identify with. When people bring their entire lives, their outer lives and their inner lives, all the good, and all the mess and confusion, into the loving gaze of Jesus the Messiah, things actually begin to become clearer.

If there's any brainwashing going on, it's often from our culture, which tries to persuade us not to ask too many questions. But when one is alert, perhaps because of an encounter with living water (I have in mind the image of a bucketful of baptismal water suddenly being poured over you), then we will, all of us, certainly, have a reaction and it might just be like that of the Woman at the Well.

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There was a clarity of insight where she realized she was speaking to her Messiah, and not just hers, but the Saviour of the World, who offered eternal life. Such a realization has consequences.

Of course to really accept the living water that offers life, we must empty ourselves of the stagnant water that pollutes us and keeps us from experiencing that new life. That means a true conversion – but Jesus isn't waiting for the conversion when he offers us that water. The offer is made already. Jesus didn't wait for the woman to reform her life – in fact, we're not told that her marital situation is regularized at all – but that does not stop her from believing.

She knew that Jesus knew about her… shall we say… 'morally complex' life, or is it more accurate to say, her "emotionally traumatic" life. Despite that, or perhaps because of it, Jesus listened to her and healed her.

This woman who was an outcast and afraid of people, goes from not believing, to believing, to being a disciple, and actually becoming an apostle to all of Samaria. (That's probably a fourth taboo Jesus broke by inviting woman to proclaim his Good News, but not all of his disciples seem to have noticed that one.)

Finally, she might not have realized the transformation that had taken place within her – but the townspeople, who previously ignored her, are now listening to her and they attest to the transformation in her, and in their own lives, because of Jesus' encounter. So my third point is that when we encounter Jesus we will be transformed. Not brainwashed, but transformed. We might be a mess, but Jesus can peacefully transform that mess into something beautiful and authentic.

As we're in a school, I'd like to suggest two pieces of homework.

The first is a question that we might ask ourselves this morning: Who do we identify with in the story? Are we like the women at the well? Ostracized and outcast, in a morally complex situation, feeling ashamed for something in our past, or just trying to go about our daily life, unaware that there is even such a thing as living water or eternal life?

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Are we the disciples, shocked at such impropriety and concerned about temporal physical needs rather than the eternal spiritual ones, doomed to always be unsatisfied and self-righteous in our certainty?

Or we might, in fact, find something of the townspeople in us. We might be the ones pushing people away because the lives they are living do not look or sound like the lives we think they should be living. We might, in truth, be prone, now and then, to making judgements about people who are living lives, that either by choice or by circumstance, have them believing or behaving in ways that are outside of what we would consider the norm, such that we, with more or less subtly, ostracize them, and make them feel less-than, excluded or outcast.

It may often be inadvertent, but we do ostracize individuals, and groups; we draw lines with distinctions; and know who is in, and who is out. But the gospel reminds us that we have to, as Jesus did, intentionally go out of ourselves. Go out of our parishes. Out of the comfort of what is our normal – to find the ostracized and to talk with them. To ask them questions and to listen to their answers. In other words, to acknowledge their humanity and autonomy and their unique situation. To acknowledge and celebrate their joys. To acknowledge and grieve the tragedies in their lives. To invite them into our communities, to our homes, and to walk with them, so they recognize that they truly belong. For no one is to be ostracized, or outcast, excluded, or dare I say, excommunicated. As Pope Francis says, compassion and mercy must be greater than prejudice, and God's patience is always greater than our stubbornness.

Try see if you can identify with one of the characters and ask yourself, how is the Lord calling you to respond?

As an aside, I think this is part of the miracle that the world is experiencing as a result of the tragic Corona Virus. Talks of war and profit and me-first, have been replaced with solidarity, and a concern for life. There is a recognition that we can only fight this virus if we do so together and that there cannot be anyone left behind. There can be no excluded group – we all have to survive this or none of us will. All the talk of climate change never grounded so many planes so quickly – this virus is dangerous, but we can overcome it, and we might even be better for

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it, even as we will mourn the many who will sadly die from it. But out of suffering, God is able to reveal something good. Just as in our morally complex lives, God is able to draw straight with crooked lines.

The second piece of homework is an invitation: to look deep into ourselves, into our lives, and as it is Lent, to make a spiritual journey, or to walk a spiritual path, towards God.

We saw in the gospel how Jesus went about awakening the woman's spiritual desire. Thanks to the Lord, she made a discovery about herself, because she agreed to look at herself in the light of the truth. I believe, in our spiritual lives, God educates and guides us so that we seek Him not outside of ourselves, but inside ourself. As the world is currently retreating because of the Corona virus, we can look inward, to ourselves, and find God there.

All spiritual paths are ways of interiorization which lead us into the depths of our being: in truth, it is there that we meet God and at the same time, we find ourselves – in truth and in Spirit. The depth of our heart is therefore both the place of our greatest intimacy, the sanctuary of our conscience, but also the space where God dwells. So the closer I am to God in me, the more I can become truly myself. The invitation this Lent is for us to encounter God in such a way that we encounter our true selves as well.

And when we are in touch with our deepest self, we will also come to know our deepest desires, which are not our own, but God's for us; and we can talk to God about them, and all our spiritual needs, in prayer; and like the Woman at the Well, have a conversation with God who is thirsting to talk to us as well.

So let's strive this week to intensify our spiritual thirst for God and to seek Him not just within the four square walls of our churches, but in the very centre of ourselves. And there, in our hearts, let us worship Him in spirit and in truth.

Amen.

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