

Living Faith

WHERE FAITH MAKES A DIFFERENCE IN OUR EVERYDAY LIVES

Week Three - Rededicating Ourselves to the Spirit of Encounter

Opening Prayer - St. Pope John Paul II, "Christ, The Way Of Conversion" (adapted)

- We thank You, Lord Jesus, because the Gospel of the Father's love, with which You came to save the world, has been proclaimed far and wide as a gift of the Holy Spirit that fills us with gladness. Increase, O Lord, our faith and our love for You. Grant us to be faithful witnesses to your Resurrection. Give us strength to proclaim Your word with courage in the work of the new evangelization, so that the world may know new hope. Amen.

Introduction

- Themes
 - Trust in God
 - Spiritual dryness
 - Conversion of heart
- Quiet Reflection
 - We all experience periods of spiritual dryness in our lives. Perhaps you're in the midst of a conflict with a co-worker, friend or family member. Perhaps your experience of church and worship isn't speaking to your heart. Or you've fallen into behaviors or practices that are separating you from God.
- Brief Discussion
 - Recall a time when you experienced a period of spiritual dryness. Was it "self-inflicted" or brought on by forces you had no control over? What were your feelings during that period?
 - What techniques have you used to overcome periods of "dryness"?

Reading - John 4:5-15, 19B-26, 39A, 40-42 "The Samaritan Woman"

Jesus came to a town of Samaria called Sychar,
near the plot of land that Jacob had given to his son Joseph.
Jacob's well was there.
Jesus, tired from his journey, sat down there at the well.
It was about noon.

A woman of Samaria came to draw water.

Jesus said to her,

"Give me a drink."

His disciples had gone into the town to buy food.

The Samaritan woman said to him,

"How can you, a Jew, ask me, a Samaritan woman, for a drink?"

—For Jews use nothing in common with Samaritans.—

Jesus answered and said to her,

"If you knew the gift of God
and who is saying to you, 'Give me a drink, '
you would have asked him
and he would have given you living water."

The woman said to him,

"Sir, you do not even have a bucket and the cistern is deep;
where then can you get this living water?

Are you greater than our father Jacob,
who gave us this cistern and drank from it himself
with his children and his flocks?"

Jesus answered and said to her,

"Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again;
but whoever drinks the water I shall give will never thirst;
the water I shall give will become in him

a spring of water welling up to eternal life."

The woman said to him,

"Sir, give me this water, so that I may not be thirsty
or have to keep coming here to draw water.

"I can see that you are a prophet.

Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain;

but you people say that the place to worship is in Jerusalem."

Jesus said to her,

"Believe me, woman, the hour is coming

when you will worship the Father

neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem.

You people worship what you do not understand;

we worship what we understand,

because salvation is from the Jews.

But the hour is coming, and is now here,

when true worshipers will worship the Father in Spirit and truth;

and indeed the Father seeks such people to worship him.

God is Spirit, and those who worship him

must worship in Spirit and truth."

The woman said to him,

"I know that the Messiah is coming, the one called the Christ;

when he comes, he will tell us everything."

Jesus said to her,

"I am he, the one who is speaking with you."

Many of the Samaritans of that town began to believe in him.

When the Samaritans came to him,

they invited him to stay with them;

and he stayed there two days.
Many more began to believe in him because of his word,
and they said to the woman,
"We no longer believe because of your word;
for we have heard for ourselves,
and we know that this is truly the savior of the world."

Fr. Foppiano's Reflection

Video link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gFf0LLu_hzc

Introduction and review

Our homily series and our LivingFaith series this Lent are about the encounters which take place in each Sunday's Gospel readings. We are reflecting on how these encounters effect both our own personal spiritual lives and the communal life of our St. Agnes and St. William of York Community. We are attempting to grow ourselves and our personal relationship with God and our community's commitment to our Mission, Vision, and Purpose.

In this Sunday's first reading we hear of an encounter between the thirsty Jews in the desert and God. In the Gospel a thirsty woman comes to draw water from a well and encounters Jesus – an encounter which will profoundly change her life. But, before we get to these two powerful encounters, let's first consider the ground we have already covered.

We have seen how temptations come into our personal spiritual lives and into the life of our community. These temptations are inevitable because the evil one is always looking for a chance to prey on our weaknesses.

One such temptation is to stay in our comfort zones. The comfort zone of the church can be particularly powerful. But, as we have learned, we are called to be missionary disciples who share the kerygma, or the first-proclamation of the Gospel. Namely: "... Christ who was crucified, died, and is risen: through him is accomplished our full and authentic liberation from evil, sin and death; through him God bestows 'new life' that is divine and eternal. This is the 'Good News' which changes man and his history, and which all peoples have a right to hear."¹ That is why our Vision Statement – our dream for our future – proclaims that we

¹ Redemptoris Missio, #44

are missionary disciples who first love God and then invite others to encounter that love.

We spent some time last week reflecting on how we can see the glory of the Lord in our own lives, how we can help others to do this, and how we might begin to pierce the “suits of armor” worn by the people in our pews. Abram trusted in God and ventured out into the unknown. God was faithful to his promises and Abram is known as the father of many nations. Peter, James, and John went up the mountain and saw the Lord in all his glory and his transfiguration. This is an experience which should be happening in all of our lives.

Of course this is no small order. Jesus gave the Church her mission: “Go make disciples” and she has been doing that for the last 2,000 years. Our goal is to try and live out that mission in our place and in our time. Fr. Mallon says that it’s not so much that Christ’s Church has a mission but rather that Christ’s mission has a Church. And we all have a part to play in that mission!

Thirst

Without a doubt the readings for the Third Sunday of Lent focus around thirst – the thirst of the Jewish people in the desert and the thirst of the Samaritan woman at the well. But is this just ordinary human thirst? Of course not. It’s a starting off point for much deeper spiritual insights.

The Book of Exodus tells us of the cruel oppression which the Jewish people faced in the desert. We hear about the great miracles that God worked to convince Pharaoh to let them go. With great pageantry God saves his people from their oppressors but when things start getting tough they have the nerve to say: “Why did you ever make us leave Egypt? Was it just to have us die here of thirst with our children and our livestock?” Then God commands Moses to strike the rock with his staff and water will flow out for the people to drink. At the end of the passage we hear the people’s question: “Is the LORD in our midst or not?” They quickly forgot all that the Lord had done for them. How he had made known his presence with them. They forgot the miracles in Egypt, the pillar of fire that led their camp, and God’s messenger Moses simply because they were thirsty. How quickly they forgot that God was with them!

Thirst brings the Samaritan woman to the well in the Gospel. This encounter is particularly powerful and moving. Jesus lays bare for the woman her situation in life. Notice how the story progresses. Jesus doesn’t come right out and address her marital situation. He talks to her about water that will not leave her thirsty

again. The woman thinks this is a great idea – she'll never have to come to the well again and lug around heavy water jars.

Once she is interested, Jesus then gently moves her to realize that he's talking about something much deeper. When she's touched by his revelation about her marriages she then recognizes Jesus to be a prophet. He further reveals himself to her as the Messiah and she can no longer contain herself – she runs into the town to tell everyone who she has found. What started as simple thirst has brought so much more fulfillment and happiness to the woman's life.

Desire for Happiness

The desire for happiness is something which is written within us. The Catechism of the Catholic Church says: "The desire for God is written in the human heart, because man is created by God and for God; and God never ceases to draw man to himself. Only in God will he find the truth and happiness he never stops searching for: 'The dignity of man rests above all on the fact that he is called to communion with God.'"²

The desire for happiness is a powerful motivating force in our lives. Perhaps we know people who never seem to be happy. Being around them is often difficult for us and it drains us of energy. Perhaps we know people who go looking for happiness in all the wrong places. This can be hard for us to watch. Maybe we are someone who has gone looking for happiness in all the wrong places and we know firsthand how dangerous this can be.

The Jewish people in the desert thought they would be happy if they could just find some water. They didn't care if it meant going back to Egypt for they were more interested in the fleeting happiness of having their thirst satisfied. The Samaritan woman went looking for happiness in six different relationships with men. Apparently none of which brought her happiness.

The question asked by the Jews in the desert, "Is the Lord in our midst or not?" reminds us of where true happiness is to be found – in God. From the Catechism: "But this 'intimate and vital bond of man to God' can be forgotten, overlooked, or even explicitly rejected by man. Such attitudes can have different causes: revolt against evil in the world; religious ignorance or indifference; the cares and riches of this world; the scandal of bad example on the part of believers; currents of thought hostile to religion; finally, that attitude of sinful man which makes him hide from God out of fear and flee his call."³ Whatever

² CCC 27

³ CCC 29

the case may be, forgetting that our happiness comes from being in right relationship with God will never lead to lasting happiness. This is the living water that Jesus promises to the Samaritan woman.

An important component of the season of Lent is an examination of the place which God holds in our lives and what we have let get in the way of that relationship. For, "although man can forget God or reject him, He never ceases to call every man to seek him, so as to find life and happiness."⁴ We call this conversion. We often think of people who are very far from God as needing to be converted but conversion is also a part of on-going discipleship. God is with the Jewish people in their slavery in Egypt. Jesus goes looking for the sinful woman. It's no coincidence that Jesus was sitting by the well in Sychar which was a Samaritan town. Jews did not associate with Samaritans - and especially men with women - but Jesus was there seeking this woman out to show us how God is actively search for a deeper relationship with every human being.

During Lent we want to ponder what gets in the way of our relationship with God. Where are we searching for happiness? Is it in all the wrong places? For example, many people search for happiness in wealth. They worship the security which money provides them. But usually what they have is never enough. They hoard their money for fear of a loss of security – fear that God will not provide for them if they are generous with their financial resources.

Other people look for happiness in pleasure. Even things which are good for us, like vacations or the occasional day off, become gods which we worship because they bring us happiness but that happiness is fleeting. Some pleasures are inherently bad for us such as pornography, sins of the flesh, and substance abuse. They are often used as a way to escape from things that make us unhappy. These fleeting pleasures can become addictions which are harmful to us in body and soul. They trick us into thinking that they will help us deal with our unhappiness but they only leave us unhappier in the end.

When we recognize these "thirsts" which we have been craving need to be dealt with we often discover our own powerlessness to handle them. We want the living water which only Jesus can give and this is where the Sacrament of Reconciliation becomes very important.

The Sacrament of Reconciliation restores friendship with God that is either damaged or broken by our sinfulness. The Catechism describes this beautifully:

"The whole power of the sacrament of Penance consists in restoring us to God's grace and joining us with him in an intimate friendship."

⁴ CCC 30

Reconciliation with God is thus the purpose and effect of this sacrament. For those who receive the sacrament of Penance with contrite heart and religious disposition, reconciliation "is usually followed by peace and serenity of conscience with strong spiritual consolation." Indeed the sacrament of Reconciliation with God brings about a true "spiritual resurrection," restoration of the dignity and blessings of the life of the children of God, of which the most precious is friendship with God.⁵

The sacrament gives us a firm moment of repentance in which we say that from this moment forward I will find my happiness in God alone. God gives us the grace which we need to leave the confessional and hold firm to this resolution to seek God first in our lives.

Conversion in Discipleship

Fr. James Mallon in his book "*Divine Renovation*", has a chapter called "Clearing out the Junk." In this chapter he talks about all the "stuff" that has built up in the Church over the years that has helped to contribute to the position that find ourselves in today. Two of the items that he says needs to be cleared out are Pelagianism and Jansenism.

Have you ever heard of them? They are actually ancient heresies condemned by the Church but have lingered in various forms down through the ages. Pelagius was a Celtic monk who lived in the Roman territories of North Africa in the late 3rd and 4th centuries. He taught that God's grace was not necessary for salvation because human nature had not been corrupted by original sin. Our weaknesses are really more about bad example and Jesus gave us the best example to follow. For Pelagius, God's favor was obtained by living a strict moral code or by a life of asceticism trying to follow the example of Jesus.

Cornelius Jansen was a Dutch priest who lived in the 17th century. He taught the opposite of Pelagiansim and put too much emphasis on God's grace so as to nullify human free will. As the years went by they too adopted a strict moral code that developed into a form of elitism. Jansenism was particularly influential in discouraging people form the frequent reception of Holy Communion. People influenced by Jansenism thought they could never be worthy to receive Holy Communion so they should just abstain from it all together. This eventually led to the Church's imposition of the "Easter Duty" and eventually Pope Pius X's encouragement of frequent Communion.

⁵ CCC 1468

The point of bringing up these two ancient heresies is to say that so many of our Catholic people have never experienced the sheer gratuity and scandalous mercy of God. Fr. Mallon says: "This hints at the very human tendency to reduce the Christian faith to some form of moral rigorism, or mere ethics." No moral issue can take the place of "the reception of the Good News of salvation. They are always and will always be secondary issues, and can never supplant the first proclamation, or kerygma – lest, as Pope Francis said, the Church fall like 'a house of cards.'"⁶

Fr. Mallon identifies three things resulting from the persistence of these heresies in the Church. First, there is the culture of minimalism that pervades the thinking of most Catholics and the culture of our parishes. "I just have to get my card punched for Mass this weekend" some people say. And then they follow that up with "Father, so it would be best not to go over 60 minutes today, and 45 would be even better, Father." Fr. Mallon says that with the minimum requirement met, "that is where it stops. Covenant faith, rooted in a personal covenant relationship with God in the midst of a covenant community, can never do enough or get enough. It is a religion of extravagance rooted in a God who proclaims his insatiable thirst for us..."⁷

In the contemporary Church there has arisen an extreme form of Pelagianism that basically says "As long as I'm not as bad as Adolf Hitler God will love me no matter what I do and I don't need to invest in my spiritual life because he will just usher me along to Heaven." So the second result is that people don't experience the sheer audacity of God's mercy. The Good News can never really be grasped because we think we don't really need it. The God who gives the same to the laborer who goes out at 9am and the one who goes out at 12noon and 4pm isn't appreciated because God owes us Heaven. Fr. Mallon theorizes that this is why Catholics don't sing in church: "The joyful song of praise to God for the gift of salvation never rises from the lips of the one who has no need of such a gift." He says, "I honestly believe that this is the reason why so many lips remain silent in our churches on Sunday mornings. Too many people literally have nothing to sing about."⁸

Once a year on Easter Sunday we have music at the 7:30 Sunday morning Mass at St. Agnes. When I stand outside after Mass I have to put on my bullet-proof vest so to deflect the barrage of complains about singing at that Mass. I always want to scream out "BUT IT'S EASTER! JESUS HAS RISEN – WE SHOULD WANT

⁶ *Divine Renovation*, p. 69.

⁷ *Ibid.* p. 70.

⁸ *Ibid.* p. 70-71.

TO SING OUT WITH JOY!” But I usually just answer with a very pathetic “Happy Easter and have a nice day” knowing that the argument really isn’t worth it.

And the last consequence is really a result of the previous two: if we can’t move beyond the mere minimum practice of our faith, and the joyful news of our salvation is not received in our hearts, than can we really be surprised when so many show little to no enthusiasm for the New Evangelization?

What is to be done?

The answer to the question “What is to be done about this?” is no easy answer. There are lots of complexities involved and lots of moving parts if we want to begin addressing the problems and getting rid of some of this junk that we have accumulated over the years. Certainly focusing on the kerygma in our preaching and in all that we do as a community is vital. Remember, the kerygma is not first in chronology but first in its importance and a reference point and a proclamation that we have to keep coming back to.

Focusing on the kerygma is a first step. And, being clear about what is expected from members of our community is another. In our dream for the future, our Vision Statement, we were very intentional to include expectations about what members of our community do. Specifically we said we “worship, we serve, we grow in faith, hope, and love.”

It may seem strange to enumerate expectations for members of the parish. Won’t people just leave if they don’t like them? Well, I suppose that’s possible but these expectations are simply an expression of the basic things that every Christian should be doing. It is a part of ongoing conversion to call people back to realize this. An expectation to worship, to service, and to growth in the spiritual life is not a burden too heavy to place upon people. As a matter of fact, not reminding people of this calling, would be a dereliction of duty.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we have covered two major themes in this week’s presentation. The first is our fundamental calling to find happiness in God. In Lent we try to move any lesser goods out of the way of God and jettison those things which are harmful to our relationship with God. We don’t want fleeting happiness. We want happiness that is rooted in God and will sustain us through all of life’s ups and downs. In the Sacrament of Reconciliation we receive the grace which we need to undergo this conversion.

The second theme we have covered is what I’m calling “conversion in discipleship.” It’s trying to understand some of the currents we are trying to

battle against in our church community. The call to conversion is certainly for us personally but it is also a call to communal conversion. Talking about expectations for the members of our parishes may be difficult but it's a conversation I think we need to have.

Please join me in praying this week for ongoing conversion. Pray that this Lent will be fruitful for ourselves and for our community.

May God bless you today and in the week to come.

Group Discussion

- The Jews in the desert questioned the presence of God among themselves. When was a time when you questioned God's presence in your own life? A time when you felt the presence of God in a profound way?
- What can we as a community do to encourage an enthusiastic spirit of worship? What would help our worship become more engaging, joyful and inspiring?
- What commitment can you make to enter into a deeper form of discipleship? How can you invite others into a new encounter with Christ?

Reflection - Pope Francis - Angelus Message, March 23, 2014

- In this Gospel passage we likewise find the impetus to "leave behind our water jar", the symbol of everything that is seemingly important, but loses all its value before the "love of God". We all have one, or more than one! I ask you, and myself: "What is your interior water jar, the one that weighs you down, that distances you from God?". Let us set it aside a little and with our hearts; let us hear the voice of Jesus offering us another kind of water, another water that brings us close to the Lord. We are called to rediscover the importance and the sense of our Christian life, initiated in Baptism and, like the Samaritan woman, to witness to our brothers. A witness of what? Joy! To witness to the joy of the encounter with Jesus; for, as I said, every encounter with Jesus changes our life, and every encounter with Jesus also fills us with joy, the joy that comes from within. And the Lord is like this. And so we must tell of the marvelous things the Lord can do in our hearts when we have the courage to set aside our own water jar.

- Every encounter with Jesus changes our lives, always. It is a step forward, a step closer to God. And thus every encounter with Jesus changes our life. It is always, always this way.

Group Discussion

- What is the "jar" you need to set aside to draw closer to Jesus?
- What is your "takeaway" today? What stood out to you? What challenged you?
- In the week ahead, how can you apply what you heard today to your life and your interactions with others? What can/should you do differently this week?

Closing

- It's been said you can't go too often to the well, that the well will eventually run dry. But the Living Water offered by God comes from a well that never runs dry. The challenge for us is having the willingness and humility to approach the well, and to be open to the conversion experience that comes through encounter with Christ.
- Scripture verse (John 4:41b)
"We no longer believe because of your word;
for we have heard for ourselves,
and we know that this is truly the savior of the world."
- Closing Prayer - (Rev. Fr. Christian B. Buenafe, O. Carm.)
Almighty and ever-living God, you are the water of life that fills and refreshes us always. May our faith be always life-giving like the water that the Samaritan woman discovered and drawn from Jesus, the savior of the world. May we also become life-giving and life-nurturing to the people of the world. This we ask through Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you, and the Holy Spirit one God, forever and ever.

Amen.