

Sermon for 12 March 2023
Lent 3, Year A

Exod 17:3-7; Rom 5:1-2, 5-8; John 4:5-42

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

You will have heard this from Fr Peter, but it bears repeating: the Samaritan woman at the well is the first Anglo-Catholic. Why? Because, when Jesus brings up a moral issue, the fact that she has been married several times and the man she is currently with is not her husband, she immediately changes the subject and talks about liturgy.

We might poke fun at ourselves for our painstaking attention to it, but liturgy is what gives structure and direction to our worship. It helps us to locate ourselves in both time and space: we express meaning with gesture and movement, and as we follow the lectionary, it tells us *when* we are, just as our rites tell us *where* we are and what we are doing. Liturgy takes us by the hand.

And as Fr Peter reminded us last week, our bodies are not things that we *have*, they are what we *are*. We are an embodied people, and our faith would be impoverished if we did not acknowledge and engage our bodies in worship.

And so as we journey through Lent, our worship guides us a step at a time. Benediction on Tuesday nights is a good example of how we use our bodies and our voices together: there is a moment, shared with Maundy Thursday, when the celebrant prostrates themselves at the words *Therefore we before him bending / this great sacrament revere*. We heard this echoed in our psalm this morning: “Come, let us worship and fall down...”

Lent is a gift for many reasons. One is that it gives us the opportunity to build these bodily habits, which prepare us spiritually for the joy that comes at Easter.

But Lent is also hard. It takes courage to get through Lent, to put ourselves through forty days of fasting and penitence, of self-denial, and then that pattern of devotion and emotional turmoil in Holy Week, culminating in the utter devastation of Good Friday. It takes courage, too, just to live from one day to the next. The news this week has shown that tragedy can strike at any time. The individual Christian life is not finished or achieved at Easter, rejoice though we may. The Christian life continues, year after year, full of temptation, loss, sorrow, and pain, alongside all the joy that we experience together. It requires daily renewed commitment, and courage to continue.

On Tuesday night, with sore knees following Benediction, there was a discussion in the upper sacristy about the merits of kneeling on parquet versus stone floors, and this devolved into a series of anecdotes about following nuns up uncomfortable stone steps on pilgrimage. The most excruciating I've seen, though, is that made by Buddhists to the great shrine at Jokhang Temple in Tibet, where pilgrims prostrate themselves after every step. They do it for miles, pieces of wood strapped to their hands clattering on the road each time they drop to their knees to touch their foreheads to the ground.

Of course, even this level of intense devotion can be stymied by external forces: this week, Chinese authorities closed the temple for several days, announcing publicly that it was for the "upgrading and transformation of the water supply network". Surely it is no coincidence at all that March 10th was the anniversary of the 1959 Tibetan National Uprising. In other years, that anniversary has been marked in desperate protest by the self-immolation of Buddhist monks at their most sacred site in Lhasa.

It is sobering to remember how lucky we are in our freedom to worship, our relative political stability, and so on. And at the same time, we must not look at the acute suffering of others and declare that our own suffering is meaningless. Neither should we look at others who seem to be doing just fine, and assume that they do not suffer at all.

As Jesus so piercingly demonstrates in our gospel reading, only God can truly know the sufferings of each human life; only God sees us to our absolute depth. Christ meets us just as he met that Samaritan woman, in our imperfection and our pain, and offers us life, the water that quenches every thirst. We can rest in that knowing, generous presence. We can receive the gift of his holy sacrament as full and embodied members of his family, we who have gone into the tomb with him at baptism and have been brought out again into new life. And this is why the Samaritan woman goes off rejoicing; she also does something courageous: she shares the good news with her brothers and sisters.

John Chrysostom writes this about the Samaritan woman: “She was not prevented by any concern for losing face from spreading around what had been said to her. For the soul, once kindled by the divine flame, does not consider glory or shame or any other earthly consideration: only the flame that consumes it... She did not want them to trust only her own report but to come and make a judgement about Christ for themselves... She does not say, “Come and believe,” but “Come and see”... For she certainly knew that if they only tasted of that well, they would feel as she did.”

“Come and see” is the name of the diocesan Lenten initiative. There are many resources available, but the weekly videos from Bishop Steven are especially good. Last week’s video commends us, among other things, to be people of courage, and integrity, and mercy, describing the mirror that Jesus holds up to us, which shows us both the truth of our sin, and a vision for our life and character.

Part of Lent’s gift is to be given the chance for self-examination. We may, like the Samaritan woman, wish to change the subject; but we should also, like her, acknowledge the truth of what Jesus shows us about ourselves. And then we should do something about it. Her pilgrimage through the Christian life began with that vision of herself, that truthful look in the mirror, which is the first, best step each of us can take on our own pilgrimage.

In the extended preface for Lent, we hear that God leads us by the hand

...into the desert of repentance
that through a pilgrimage of prayer and discipline
we may grow in grace
and learn to be your people once again.
Through fasting, prayer and acts of service
you bring us back to your generous heart.
Through study of your holy word
you open our eyes to your presence in the world
and free our hands to welcome others
into the radiant splendour of your love.

We are not wandering aimlessly. In Lent, through our liturgy and worship, God leads us by the hand into the desert so that we can truthfully repent in body, mind, and spirit, and return to him. The process requires honesty about who we are, and willingness to change; and courage to keep going. Perhaps more than courage, even, we must xbe generous. Generous enough to ourselves to see that vision of what we ought to be and to recognise it as possible; and generous enough to bring others with us on the journey. Pray, my brothers and sisters, that whether our lives are long or short, our response to the gospel may gratitude for the chance to go on pilgrimage, and the willingness to imitate God's generous heart.

Amen.