

Commentary to the Third Sunday of Lent (A)



We Can Be Better

The Third Sunday of Lent presents the long Gospel account of the meeting of Jesus with the Samaritan Woman at a well. I usually have to prepare a homily based on this Gospel every year since this is the Gospel for Masses with catechumens and candidates coming into the Church in the RCIA experience. But this is such a rich Gospel that I am still finding new aspects of it that preach to me. Then again, all scripture is alive, the Living Word of God.

I am struck this year by two questions that are new to me: the first is, "Why did this woman make such a radical change so quickly" The second question is, "Why did the townsfolk emphasize that their reason for faith had shifted from what the woman said to what Jesus was saying"

The first question. When Jesus encountered the woman, He broke the normal practice of Jews and ask her, a Samaritan, for assistance. A conversation follows between the two which seems to have a lot of give and take:

"I am shocked that you are asking me for water."

"If you knew who was asking you, you would ask him for water that would quench your thirst for eternity"

There's even a discussion on who's correct in the theology department: the Jews who worship in Jerusalem or the Samaritans who worship on the Holy Mountain. And so forth.

In the middle of all this, Jesus says something to the woman that causes her to allow him to change her life. He told her that He knew she was living with a man outside of marriage, and that she had been married five times before this. He told her that He knew she had been immoral and was continuing her sinful ways.

This caused the woman to change her life. Why? It doesn't make sense that a Samaritan woman would be so impressed with the accusations of a Jewish man. There must be more to this. Jesus' tone must have conveyed His concern for her. She must have felt that she was being addressed as a person, not as an object of scorn by Jews or even by men in general. Jesus' tone must have said to her, "My dear woman, you can be better than this." He speaks to her heart and her heart turns to Him.

You can be better than this. Recently that phrase has been bouncing inside my head, not just as something I say to others, but as something I say to myself. I can be better this. I can be better than an immoral society that sees sex as a recreation and morality as a trite vestige of the past. I can be better than a society that seeks fulfillment in material possessions and condemns itself to the meaningless acquisition of stuff.

Perhaps, the problem is that I (and you) tend to see sin as either mortal or superficial fluff. So, if we haven't committed a mortal sin, we think that we are not that bad and we don't see the weight our behavior lays on ourselves, or on others. We don't see the pain we are inflicting on the Body of Christ because, after all we just stubbed its toe; we didn't amputate its foot. Maybe some of the reasons why I am not better is that I have not really tried hard to be better. Maybe, it's the same with you. Perhaps that temper, that lack of patience, that bad language on the road, etc, that we bring to reconciliation quickly pops up again because we are not convinced that we can be better than we have been. Perhaps, if we are involved in serious sin, we don't go to confession because we have given up the fight and feel that we will not be able to avoid the sin in the future. Maybe we are selling ourselves short.

Jesus transformed the woman at the well because He was concerned about her. He wanted her to be the best person she could be. He told her that she could do it. And she heard His message screaming to her in her heart. She determined to change her life and then wanted to shout out to the world that she had an experience of the Messiah.

That is why we seek penance during Lent. That's why we go to confession throughout the year. We know that Jesus loves us. We know that He cares for each of us individually. We know that He sees the bumps and bruises of our lives that we impose upon ourselves and others. He doesn't condone our sins, be they big or little. He hurts for us. He wants us to be better. And His Love transforms us. We want to be better because we also want to have a constant experience of the Messiah's love.

That brings me to the second question: Why did the townsfolk switch their reasons for faith from the woman they knew to this Jew? They saw that the woman had changed, and for the first time that she was happy. They wanted a share in this happiness themselves and thought that she must be right in what she was saying about this Jew. But then they experienced Jesus. Now the woman became secondary to them. Jesus was all that mattered. They allowed the words of the Word of God to change their lives. They believed and followed not because of what someone had said about Jesus, but because of Jesus.

It is not what the preacher says about Jesus that matters. It is not what the writer writes about Jesus that matters. All that matters is Jesus Christ. We are not followers of Apollos, or Paul, or this priest, or that deacon. We are followers of Jesus Christ. And Jesus Christ tells us that we can be better than we are.

He makes us want to be better than we are. His overpowering love gives us the courage to change our lives and to embrace His Life. The blood that poured from his wounds on the cross has ignited our bodies with the fire of his Love.

"You can be better than this." He says to us in the tender, warm voice of Love. And we will be better.

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