

3RD WEEK OF LENT YEAR A

Homily 1

I suggest that you sit down for the gospel. It is quite a long reading, and there are a number of points for us to notice. What I shall do is to read it a section at a time and make a few comments, rather than save them all for the end.

John's Gospel is essentially a work of theology that he gets across through stories and conversations. What we have is certainly not the accurate transcripts of interviews. Today's gospel, along with a whole lot of other things, offers us a succession of images, that give us a good chance to reflect on our own experience.

Jesus came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon. A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink." (His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.) The Samaritan woman said to him, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.) Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that 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 have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?" Jesus said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life." The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water."

With this rich imagery John is effectively asking: Does the image of a *spring of water* welling up inside you tap into your own experience? Is your experience one of thirst satisfied, permanently? Has it been transforming?

Jesus said to her, "Go, call your husband, and come back." The woman answered him, "I have no husband." Jesus said to her, "You are right in saying, 'I have no

husband'; for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!" The woman said to him, "Sir, I see that you are a prophet. Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem." Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth."

The woman thinks of Jesus in terms familiar to herself: she calls him a *prophet*. But she wants to understand better, and raises the issue of where to *worship*. By having her do this, John invites us to go deeper: Would we use the word worship of our relationship with God? Jesus certainly speaks of a relationship that is totally involving: *worship in spirit and in truth...* engaging the real me with the real God.

The woman said to him, "I know that Messiah is coming" (who is called Christ). "When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us." Jesus said to her, "I am he, the one who is speaking to you."

To make sense of this little section, it is helpful to know that Samaritans, like Jews, did also expect a future *Messiah*. One of the things they expected of their Messiah was that he would know the secrets of their hearts. John's message is that Jesus is more than a clairvoyant, more even than a Messiah. Jesus claims for himself the divine title: *I am*. We probably imagine that we have no problem with that... but do we, deep in our bones, see the stamp of God, for example, in the response of Jesus to the evil and violence of the world: to oppose it (and indeed overcome it) with love that expressed itself in non-violent action and forgiveness?

Just then his disciples came. They were astonished that he was speaking with a woman, but no one said, "What do you want?" or, "Why are you speaking with her?" Then the woman left her water jar and went back to the city. She said to the people, "Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?" They left the city and were on their way to him.

Meanwhile the disciples were urging him, "Rabbi, eat something." But he said to them, "I have food to eat that you do not know about." So the disciples said to one another, "Surely no one has brought him something to eat?" Jesus said to them, "My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work. Do you not say, 'Four months more, then comes the harvest'? But I tell you, look around you, and see how the fields are ripe for harvesting. The reaper is already receiving wages and is gathering fruit for eternal life, so that sower and reaper may rejoice together. For here the saying holds true, 'One sows and another reaps.' I sent you to reap that for which you did not labor. Others have labored, and you have entered into their labor."

This section allows John to depth the inner world of Jesus. For Jesus, *doing the will* of God, getting close to and carefully tuning in to the heart of God, was what sustained his spirit, gave purpose and meaning to his life, and enabled him to cope with anything. *My food*, what nourishes me, is *to do the will of the one who sent me*. He goes on to speak of the *harvest*, already there for those who know how to look. I am reminded of a rhyme I heard in childhood: "Two men looked forth from their rison bars: One saw mud, the other saw stars." Can we regard our world with a spirit of hope?

Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman's testimony, "He told me everything I have ever done." So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them; and he stayed there two days. And many more believed because of his word. They said to the woman, "It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Savior of the world."

The townspeople move quickly to faith: *We know that he is the Saviour of the world*. Jesus is, indeed, more than a Messiah for Samaritans, more than a Messiah for Jews. He is the one who turns life around, who turns the world around, who moves people beyond closed communities with their clearly defined boundaries, to a universal inclusiveness. He is the *Saviour of the world*. Do we seek to own Jesus as though he were ours? or do we see him as the *saviour* for all, at work, then, not just among Catholics, Christians, but also among Muslims, Buddhists, whoever? Do we see him at work already: *the fields are ripe for harvesting!*

Homily 2

I want to reflect on the end section of today's Gospel. After talking with Jesus, the Samaritan woman went back into the town, told the townsfolk about her encounter with Jesus, and invited them to *Come and See*. Her words echoed Jesus' own words to the first disciples who followed Jesus after John the Baptist had identified him as the *Lamb of God*. In reply to their question: *Where do you live?* Jesus had said to them: *Come and see*. On that occasion, the Gospel said: *they went and saw, and remained with him that evening*.

The Samaritan townsfolk heard the woman. On the basis of her witness, *they started walking towards him*. They were open enough to unexpected possibilities: open to other, perhaps better, ways of seeing life, open to learn, even from a Jew, traditionally classified as bitter enemy. They asked Jesus to stay with them and *he stayed for two days*. Like the first disciples, they remained with him. After the encounter, they were able to say: *We have heard him ourselves and we know that he really is the saviour of the world. We know that he really is the saviour of the world*.

Who is Jesus to you? What does Jesus mean to you? Can you express your answer in words not learnt from others – words not used by the catechism, or in our Catholic sub-culture? As the Samaritan townsfolk said to the woman: *We no longer believe because of what you told us. We have heard him ourselves, and we know ...* On the basis of our own personal experience, what does Jesus mean to us? The words in today's reading can ring in our own ears: *Come and see. They went and saw and remained with him*. Their experience of him led them to their truly personal response of faith.

Homily 3

Jesus came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon. A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, 'Give me a drink'. (His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.)

The Samaritan woman said to him, 'How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman, of Samaria?' (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.)

What is John wanting to alert us to? Essentially, that Jesus is not into exclusion. In the accepted estimation, this person was excluded on two counts: she was a woman, and she was a Samaritan. Jesus excludes no one from the reach of his concern and love. For him, there are no insiders or outsiders. Is that relevant to Australia as we wrestle with the place of women in society and issues like who can be Australian and who cannot?

Jesus answered her, 'If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that 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 have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?' Jesus said to her, 'Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.' The woman said to him, 'Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water.'

Later in the Gospel, Jesus will speak again about "living water", and the Gospel will make clear that what Jesus was referring to was the Spirit, that is, the love of God, indeed, the love of Jesus, as experienced by us. The love of God, the love of Jesus, according to the Gospel, can *gush up* within us like a spring, quenching our own thirst, and pour out from us to refresh the *thirst* of those we encounter. A problem is that we need to feel our inner thirst. It's there – deep within the hearts of all of us – that thirst to matter, to feel secure, ultimately, to be loved. But in our affluent world, we try so often instead, to fill the emptiness with distraction, entertainment, new experiences, travel, consumerism. And so many finish up so unhappy.

The woman said to him, 'Sir, I see that you are a prophet. Our ancestors worshipped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem.' Jesus said to her, 'Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. [You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews.] But the hour is

coming, and is now here, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.'

True worship is not about where. It is not about rituals, language and gestures – though these things can help us or annoy us. Not long before, Jesus had claimed that his own risen body would be the new temple. *Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.* People would access God through the risen crucified humanity of Jesus, through being truly and ever-more-deeply christened. But, as Jesus said, that is a question of spirit and truth. Hebrew prophets has consistently criticised the nation for splitting worship and life style. Worship, our relating to God, is expressed in practice in the ways we relate to each other: *Hear them what Yahweh asks of you: to live justly, to love tenderly, and to walk humbly with your God.* We learn true justice, true love, true humility from making our own the way of Jesus: a life style that is not exclusive, that loves spontaneously before anything else, that is prepared to be victimised by those who do not understand. At the same time, our motivation for justice, for compassion and for humility comes from our search for God, is fed from our thirst for God, and draws any genuine transformative power it might have from the love of God, the Spirit of Jesus, that bubbles up and gushes forth from us.

Over the coming months, we shall be expected to adopt new translations for the prayers of the Mass, and for the answers you make, etc. They may help some. They will annoy me. But let us keep our priorities clear. It would be tragic to burn up energy arguing about language when what matters is true worship in spirit and in truth – how we connect worship and life, how we see our worship conditioning our practical living out, in this real world with its questions and issues, the nitty-gritty of justice, love and humility, or, as Jesus put it in the Beatitudes, of mercy, purity of heart and peace-making.

The woman said to him, 'I know that Messiah is coming' (who is called Christ). 'When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us.' Jesus said to her, 'I am he, the one who is speaking to you.' Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman's testimony, 'He told me everything I have ever done.'

A wonderful comment from the nameless woman: Jesus had reached out to her warmly. He had treated her as adult and as equal. He had listened to her. And her experience of that was simply: Here is someone who has understood me, who has helped me to understand myself, who has enabled me to see in a new and transformed way *all I have ever done*.

So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them; and he stayed there for two days. And many more believed because of his word.

The nameless, customarily excluded woman became the first apostle. She led her compatriots to Jesus, and then sensitively stepped back, allowing them to hear him directly.

They said to the woman, 'It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Saviour of the world.'

The Samaritans' act of faith was wonderful. These were outsiders, despised by the religious Jews, ignorant and sinners. Not only did they recognise Jesus as Saviour, but saw that his saving power reached out to all: he was *truly the Saviour of the world*.

Homily 4

(I shall read the shorter version of today's Gospel, as we have it on the Bulletin. It is still long, and covers a number of wonderful points. So I shall read it section by section, commenting as I go along. [I invite you to sit.]

"Jesus came to the Samaritan town called Sychar associate with Samaritans."

What has the Gospel passage shown us so far about Jesus? He casually broke two taboos; he crossed two boundaries. He started a conversation with a *woman* he did not know. In the patriarchal cultures of the Mediterranean, that was a serious contravention of personal male honour. What is more, the woman was *Samaritan*. As far as Jews were concerned, Samaritans were the enemy, the "not-us". How, or why, could he be so dismissive of such strong nationalistic and cultural barriers?

We shall read on: *“Jesus replied; If you only knew ... welling up to eternal life.”*

If we get through Jesus’ symbolic language, he basically claimed that he possessed, and was prepared to share, something that satisfied the deepest human *thirst*. What is our deepest human thirst? the unsatisfied thirst that drives all our hopes, our desires, our plans? What do we most long for? Each of us has to answer that for ourselves. Jesus identified it as *eternal life*. But someone else’s answer, even Jesus’ answer, is not enough. Perhaps, until we identify that deep thirst for ourselves, there is not much point in going further.

The Gospel continued: *“‘Sir’, said the woman, ‘give me some ... I see you are a prophet’.”*

The woman did not understand what Jesus said. Not surprisingly, she took him literally. Yet she sensed something in Jesus that intrigued her, and that led her to think that he might have something worthwhile to say to her: *I see that you are a prophet*. What intrigued her? Jesus had related to her, adult to adult, respectfully, warmly – despite the nationalistic and cultural proscriptions.

Perhaps we ourselves could take that further. He loves. And he loves inclusively. His love totally disregards our worthiness or otherwise. [They are quite irrelevant to his openness to us, and to his instinctively warm acceptance of us.] He offered the woman access to *eternal life* – because that was how he lived himself. *Eternal life* is life proper to God. Since God's life is loving, *eternal life* is our sharing in God's loving. Jesus offers us that possibility – a possibility that can become increasingly actual to the extent that we allow it, and seek it, across life.

When I ask myself what is it that I instinctively thirst for, I think that my answer goes something like this: Not just to be loved, to be loved even by God; but to be free enough, fearless enough, detached enough, mature enough to love myself and others inclusively – no boxes, no “us/them”, no deserving/undeserving – just free to, and wanting to, love. Just as it is with God, sharing in God's loving – *eternal life*. The thirst is still hesitant, but stirring there somewhere.

We shall read on. *“Our fathers worshipped ... I am he.”*

That is worth thinking about, but I shall leave it for now, and read the last bit.

Many Samaritans ... saviour of the world."

The woman's encounter with the intriguing Jesus seems to have led her to a growing encounter with herself. Her deeper *thirst* had stirred, and she had begun to feel an unexpected, unfamiliar joy bubbling within her. She could not keep it to herself. She had to share it with her neighbours. And it seems her joy was contagious.

Pope Francis has recently invited us all to refresh and to deepen our encounter with Jesus. He wants us to notice and to identify our deepest heart-longings. He wants us to touch again into our joy, and to share the Good News, the Gospel, with our friends and neighbours – giving them a taste of our deepening, unthreatened, all-embracing respect and love.

Homily 5

Towards the end of the second last chapter of his Gospel, John the evangelist made clear why, about two decades after the appearance of the Gospels of Mark, Matthew and Luke, he chose to write a fourth one. He wrote: *"There were many other signs that Jesus worked and the disciples saw, but they are not recorded in this book. These are recorded so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing this you may have life through his name"*.

John apparently saw Jesus' public life as a rich source of what he called *signs*, pointing to mystery and depth in Jesus that mere history could never do justice to. That mystery John had clearly stated in the opening verses of his Gospel: *"In the beginning was the Word: the Word was with God and the Word was God... The Word was made flesh, he lived among us, and we saw his glory... From his fulness we have, all of us, received ... grace and truth have come through Jesus Christ."*

In the rest of his Gospel, John built on incidents from the life of Jesus. He saw them as *signs*; and proceeded to reflect on them through a variety of literary means: long conversations, monologues, etc, to illustrate and open the way into the mystery of

Jesus. He wanted to help his readers — second and third generation Christians by now — to reflect on their human experience of life since their conversion and to see there confirmation of the on-going presence and action of Jesus within themselves. He did not pretend to give them necessarily the actual words or deeds of the historical Jesus; but wanted to suggest how an original incident could be seen as a *sign* pointing to the deeper reality of Jesus, the risen Jesus, the Word of God, whom they had come, or could come, to know through their reflection on life and their prayer.

Now, two thousand years later, we Christians can use the Gospel of John, his book of signs, to lead us to reflect on our lives and our prayer in order to find Jesus there and to deepen our personal relationship with him.

Today's Gospel passage is a wonderful illustration, a wonderful *sign*, of what can happen in our lives. The passage finished up: "*Many Samaritans from that town came to believe in him because of the woman's testimony, 'He told me everything I did.'* So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them. He stayed there two days. Many more came to believe because of what he said. They said to the woman, '*We have come to believe not because of what you had to say. We have heard him ourselves, and we know that he is truly the Saviour of the world*'.

Does that speak to your experience? You became followers of Jesus at first because someone else, probably your parents, shared their faith with you. Like the Samaritans, might we now say to our parents, "*We have come to believe not because of what you had to say. We have heard him ourselves...* [Our faith has grown and become personal]. *We know that he is truly the Saviour of the world.*" There is a world of difference between knowing about Jesus, and knowing him personally, knowing him intimately.

Notice, too, the woman's invitation to her fellow townspeople, "*Come and see someone who told me all I have done. Could this be the Christ?*" No way had there been time for Jesus to have told her all she had done. But her brief encounter with him was enough to assure her that she, with all her colourful history, was totally and unconditionally accepted by him. John would love us, his readers, to have that same certainty — if we do not have it already — by coming to know Jesus ever more deeply through our prayerful reflection on life.

Homily 6

Today's Gospel passage is so rich, as is so often the case with John's Gospel. Unlike Matthew, Mark or Luke, whose Gospels give us remembered details of Jesus' deeds and teachings over the brief period of his public life, John's Gospel rather aimed to tease out what John had come to understand more deeply about Jesus over the sixty years or so that had passed since Jesus had risen. John wrote, as he said elsewhere, so that his readers could deepen their faith that Jesus whose actual deeds, etc. they had read about in those earlier Gospels was in fact "*the Messiah, the Son of God*" and so that, as they deepened their faith and trust in him, "*they might have life through his Name*". The long discourses that fill the Gospel of John reflect what John and other Christian believers who had gathered around John had come to see ever more clearly under the guiding inspiration of the Spirit of Jesus.

Today's passage lists a number of insights into Jesus expressing, often in creative conversational format and with quite deep intuition, the fruits of John's own personal meditation and on-going practical experience. The passage confidently showed its readers a Jesus who had broken free from so many restrictive assumptions of his Jewish culture — free and ready to talk to women, and a Samaritan woman at that. John spoke of his experience of that freedom as like a refreshing *spring of water welling up* from somewhere in himself and contributing to a feeling of being ever more alive. He rejoiced in a Jesus free from the centuries-old prejudices and hostility existing between Jews and Samaritans, no longer arguing about the fruitless distinctions between Jewish and Samaritan worship. He opened people instead to a God accessible to all, confined to no particular locality or tradition and truly available spiritually to everyone who seeks.

The passage highlighted the woman's experience of feeling mysteriously known and tenderly understood by Jesus — a Jesus who clearly did not condemn her colourful but also shameful past, who freed her to accept that past, and who helped her to relax sufficiently to afford her the confidence to tell her fellow townspeople what had happened and to wonder if Jesus himself might indeed be the messianic figure awaited [and argued about] by both Jews and Samaritans. Might this respectful tenderness of

Jesus have been one aspect of the Risen Christ treasured most strongly by the Gospel— a clearly relational Jesus who took the woman seriously?

The passage concluded by reflecting on the response of those townspeople. The Gospel pictured them coming together to greet Jesus. In all four Gospels, have we ever been shown a whole town of people coming out to Jesus and welcoming him like that? They even begged him to stay with them. Personally, I find that intriguing. Interestingly, the passage used a couple of words used earlier in the Gospel when it recounted Jesus' call of the first disciples a short time after Jesus' baptism. There, it had described how Andrew and an unnamed companion first met Jesus. When they saw him, they followed him. Jesus asked them what they were looking for? They answered, "*Where are you staying?*" and he replied, "*Come and see.*" The Gospel commented: "*They came and stayed*" — both special words in John's Gospel vocabulary. Today's passage pointedly used the same words of the Samaritan townspeople.

Finally the Gospel commented on the outcome of the townspeople's invitation to come and stay: "*We have heard him ourselves and we know that he really is the saviour of the world.*" The woman's statement had aroused their interest. Their coming and staying had opened their minds even further: "*Now we no longer believe because of what you told us; we have heard him ourselves — and we know that he really is the saviour of the world.*"

Does their observation throw some light on one reason for today's diminishing congregations? In today's world, do practising Catholics need deliberately to make the personal effort to know Jesus personally?

Source: John McKinnon

 for more reflections, [click here](#)
 =====