

LENT 3 – YEAR A (2026)

Very few people come to the Christian faith, as did S. Paul, by means of a damascene conversion – a moment of absolute clarity, with the accompanying conviction that the claims of Jesus Christ and his Church are true. Instead, as was the case until relatively recently, many of us were simply taken to church on a Sunday, and that practice became part of our spirituality and identity. And, whilst that is not to say that such Christians are unthinking sheeple, who are compelled by habit rather than conviction, it is a simple fact that the majority of Christians throughout the ages will have been those for whom Christianity was the prevailing culture that influenced every area of their lives; and they wouldn't have known any different. As the historian Tom Holland says of Western civilisation, 'We are the fish, and Christianity is the sea in which we swim'.

But, as Christian adherence has declined, the Church has lost influence, and progressive secularism has become the dominant ideology in contemporary society, the former pattern of churchgoing and the transmission of the Faith from parent to child has largely been lost in a culture in which many options besides Christianity are available in the spiritual marketplace. And yet, in spite of what might appear to be an irreversible downward-spiral, there are green shoots of hope; as people, young and old, feeling dissatisfied with what materialistic modernity has to offer, are questioning the smug and superior shibboleths that deride belief in God, and succeed in convincing many that

happiness and fulfilment can be found in the exercise of personal autonomy in the pursuit of pleasure and financial security. But, equally as many are disaffected with this creed and lifestyle, and are turning to the Church for answers: their souls are thirsty, and they are searching for meaning and truth.

In today's Gospel reading, we heard about Jesus' encounter with the woman of Samaria: and, whilst this episode is extraordinary, and operates, on many levels, what it highlights most clearly is the universal human quest for the divine. Leaving aside the hatred that existed between Samaritan and Jew, and the woman's morally compromised past, what this meeting demonstrates is the process of enlightenment, by which a person searching for meaning and a fresh start comes, by degrees, to a realisation that the restless longing of the soul can only be satisfied by communion with God. This gradual process of discernment, exploration, and testing the water is the means by which most people come to a living faith, which is always initiated and inspired by God and not by us.

And, it is clear that the Samaritan woman also didn't 'get it' straight away: she asked questions, she asserted her currently-held beliefs, and she misunderstood who Jesus was, and what he was offering. But, rather than dismiss her, try to convince her with dry doctrine, or berate her for her failings, Jesus simply kept talking, and held her in conversation – a reminder of the power of personal interaction, and of the need for openness, listening, and dialogue in the pursuit of truth and faith. But, what is most intriguing about this encounter is the

question it poses: who was the greater seeker, the Samaritan woman or the Son of God? Because there is a paradox here: for, in this meeting, it was not only the Samaritan woman who was searching; God, in Christ, sought her too. And, in order properly to understand this exchange, we need to set it in the broader context of Jesus' ministry in S. John's Gospel, in which Jesus' mission is to show, by miraculous signs and radical inclusion, that his incarnation was as much about God's longing to restore and be in relationship with lost humanity, as it is about our need for him. God, who is the source of living water, is thirsty for our faith. And this truth is at the heart of the theology of the Incarnation: in his humanity, Jesus comes to seek us, in order to reconcile and restore us by his divinity. And this yearning for our yearning within the heart of God is universal, and not restricted to any particular ethnicity, tribe or background. For the Son of God reveals that our loving heavenly Father makes no distinction between Jew or Samaritan, or those whom they represent; but, rather, offers us a relationship that is not based on our merit, ability or status, but on his initiative of grace in the life, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Likewise, as Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman makes clear, God does not hold our past mistakes or present failings against us, but offers us a new beginning in and through his Son; just as it is in and through his Son that we have access to his grace, which is no longer linked and limited to specific locations and peoples, but is available to all who worship him in spirit and in truth.

And so, the application of this morning's Gospel reading is twofold: first, it serves as guidance for how we, as individual Christians and as a church community, should engage in nurturing and encouraging those who are seeking God and exploring faith; and, secondly, it speaks to our own need for spiritual renewal and revitalisation, without which our souls become arid, and the practice of faith mere outward observance.

Concerning others, then, like Jesus, we need to meet people where they are, not judging them by their past, nor dismissing their questions or belittling their beliefs; but, by listening to their stories and concerns, their hopes and fears, offer them a generous and gentle space in which to grapple with the mystery of the divine. And, recognising that we are also seekers after truth, and do not have all the answers, it is not our place to provide glib or text-book solutions to life's problems; but, rather, our vocation is to accompany others on the journey, and thus, through sharing our own faith and our humanity, to be to them something of the presence, compassion and grace of Jesus Christ.

And, for ourselves, we need to be acutely aware of our own need of God, and of the living water that keeps us spiritually alive. Though baptism itself can never be repeated, post-baptismal grace needs to be replenished: since, because of our sins, and the temptations and attachments that draw us away from God, this well-spring of divine life and grace within us can drain away as easily as it can become stagnant. Only by returning to the Source can we be restored in the

image of the Creator; only through prayer, worship, and regular reception of the Sacraments can Jesus heal and renew us, and make us ever-more fully alive. God longs for us and for all people to share in his life, and to be restored in the image of his love. And, as the story of the Samaritan woman makes clear, there are no entrance exams or criteria of acceptability; only a thirsty God, whose search for us is satisfied by our search for him. Amen.