

A Sermon for the Third Sunday in Lent

Today is both the Third Sunday in Lent, and International Women's Day. While the Christian faith has an imperfect record when it comes to the treatment of women, and like many other organisations and institutions, still has a way to go before there is full equality between men and women, women do indeed play a wonderful and significant role in the life of the Church, and in scripture.

Personally, I give thanks for the woman and men whose faith has led them to pursue growth and change in the Church to bring it where it is today. Their dedicated work made my standing here and preaching to you today possible. I also give thanks for those who are at the forefront of change at the moment and who will shape its future. Leaders like Archbishop-elect Sarah Mullally are vital to the ongoing life of the Church, and they demonstrate that all are called to use their God-given talents in the service of God's people, just as Christ ministered to all and welcomed all.

As a human institution, the Church needs to grow and develop to meet the needs of the people as it shares God's presence in the world. And as a divine institution, it is called to reflect the love and wisdom of God in all its depth. It is when these two things combine, that the people of God are best able to respond to God's presence in our lives, and live out our calling as Christians.

We have a glimpse of a woman who had an interesting role in today's Gospel story, and who contributed to the sharing of that good news. And I'll turn to the interaction she has with Jesus shortly, but first we find ourselves in the desert with the people of Israel. And they are thirsty ...

One of the problems that I have with the passage from Exodus is that it can mislead us about just how God might be able to intervene in any situation. The striking of the rock and the instant provision of the much-needed water may lead us to a literal expectation that God will directly intervene whenever we want, as if on command. In my experience, God is not such an interventionist, and we cannot expect God to perform in such ways, and on our terms. What God has done, and does, is give us the resources, skills and knowledge and creativity to use what we have and what is around us to sustain us, if we have the wisdom to do so.

So, rather than whinging at Moses and demand an answer that satisfies us, let us be people who trust in the goodness of God and start looking for an oasis and its supply of water to drink, believing that it will be there ...

The Gospel passage tells of Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well.

What I particularly value in this interaction is what happens once they've had their initial conversation. The woman is so moved that she goes back into town to tell others about Jesus and to convince them to come and speak with him for themselves. She becomes an apostle herself, believing there is value and worth in Jesus' wisdom, and wanting others to experience what she experienced. To me, this is the most important part of this narrative. It is the moment when someone who remains un-named in the telling becomes an evangelist, calling others and sharing her belief that Jesus is the Messiah. I only wish we knew her name.

And Jesus remains consistent throughout the discussion. He speaks with her openly, disregarding cultural norms of the time which would have frowned on them sharing things in common. He treats her as an equal, being willing to teach her and share the 'living water' that he speaks of.

Ultimately many people come and listen to Jesus, and are moved to believe. The passage ends with others affirm that thanks to the woman, they now believe. Jesus even stays in the town for a couple of days in order that he may spend time with the people and respond to their need.

So in this season of Lent, as we contemplate our faith and our being called back into relationship with God, let us give thanks for the people who have influenced our faith, who, like the Samaritan woman at the well, have invited us to come into the presence of God and to learn, and experience the divine for ourselves.

Thanks be to God for those people, and the legacy of belief they helped to plant within us.

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