

Third Sunday of Lent, A (Scrutiny) – March 24, 2019 – Very Rev. Bryan W. Jerabek, J.C.L.
Cathedral of St. Paul, Birmingham, Ala. – 5pm Vigil, 8:30 & 11am Sunday Masses – 800 words

Jesus met the Samaritan woman at Jacob’s Well, an important place of romantic discovery in Old Testament history. It was thought to be to that same well that Abraham sent one of his servants to find a wife for his son, Isaac; the servant met Rebekah, saw that she was suitable, and she then accepted to be married to Isaac. It was also said to have been the same place where Isaac’s son Jacob met his future wife, Rachel – and the well would come to be associated with him. Theirs, however, was no arranged marriage: it was love at first sight. With this background and considering what Christ reveals about the Samaritan woman’s personal history, one wonders if she wasn’t also there looking for love.

The kind of love that she finds, however, is much different than the type she may have sought. Jesus, in fact, leads her to begin having a proper type of self-love – and that requires her to confront the reality of who she had been until then. “Come see a man who told me everything I have done”, she exclaims to everyone – not angrily or in shame, but with excitement and hope. Her sin had distorted her sense of self and caused her to end up in a sort of vicious circle, repeating the same mistakes. It’s akin to thinking that if we just keep repeating something that manifestly doesn’t work, eventually it will work. That, in fact, is a definition of insanity, and insanity removes a person from an honest confrontation with reality.

Proper self-love involves seeking our true good: making those moral choices that are ordered to the salvation of our body and soul. This is not the same as selfishness or egotism; much less is it the extreme turning-in on oneself of narcissism. No; because it is ordered to our salvation, it is a love of self that is preceded and illuminated by the love of God.¹ St. Paul said in the second reading, “God proves his love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us”. He does not love our sin but he does love us in spite of it. Loving ourselves in return involves confronting and rooting out our sin with Christ’s help – that sin that otherwise threatens to keep us from the salvation that he died to give.

The woman at the well encountered the love of God in Christ, and so was able to see herself more clearly and more truly. She then led others to a similar encounter, as they said: “We no longer believe you because of your word; for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the savior of the world”. She could not help but share with others what she had found. Thus she fulfilled Christ’s commandment, “Love your neighbor as yourself”. She could have left them where they were at – left them comfortable in their sins, as she had been. There is always that temptation. But if God’s love does not settle on that for us, we should not settle on that for our neighbors, either. Proper love of self leads to proper love of neighbor.

The regular use of the Sacrament of Confession is one of the best ways of keeping ourselves rooted in reality – in the reality of who we have been and who the Lord calls us to be. God’s love shines forth in a singular way in that great sacrament. It meets us as we arrive and accompanies us as we leave. More than that, it gives us the special graces we need truly to amend our lives. It is so easy today, especially through social media, for us to project a carefully-curated image of ourselves; but such is not true self-love, for the self involved is not really authentic, and the love applied to it is not ordered to redemption, to salvation. We may indeed fool others and ourselves, but there is no fooling God.

Christ said to the Samaritan woman, “Give me a drink”. Hanging on the cross, he would effectively say the same thing: “I thirst”. He thirsts for you and for me – to the point of death. He so greatly wants to save us. He died before we were worthy, to give us the confidence of

¹ See Canon George D. Smith, D.D., Ph.D., *The Teaching of the Catholic Church*, 2nd Ed. (1952: London, Burns & Oates), p. 648.

knowing that salvation does not depend upon us but on him. We have the choice of living in the light of his love, as the woman at the well and so many from her town ended up doing, or in fleeing from the light into some sort of alternative reality. He asks you and me also for a drink: he thirsts for our souls, our true selves – with all our sins and defects, and with all his love and transforming grace.