

Third Sunday of Lent, A – March 15, 2020 – Very Rev. Bryan W. Jerabek, J.C.L.
St. Stephen’s University Chapel, Birmingham, Alabama – 10am & 8pm Masses – 625 words

The meeting of Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well is surely one of the most beautiful scenes in the gospels. Here we see a woman who is alone and afraid, coming at an unconventional time to draw water, most likely because of her isolation and fear. But Christ arranges things so that he can be there to meet her in her fear, so that she may not be alone. There is much that we can gain from reflecting on how our Lord arranged this meeting.

Why was this woman suffering as a social outcast? After all, drawing water at the well was ordinarily a community activity – a time to visit and even to gossip, to enjoy the company of others. And it was usually done at a cooler time of the day; she is there in the heat of high noon, apparently seeking to be alone. But she was a sinner – an adulteress who had been serially married and was currently unmarried. Jesus does not delay in reminding her of that.

Yes, rather than helping her feel good about herself – perhaps by indulging in platitudes – he causes her to come face-to-face with the sin that is at the root of her unease. But note well: he does not do so in an unkind way. His fatherly love and concern is evident throughout this encounter. And based on how she reacts, it is clear she perceived that. This confrontation is not to make her feel ashamed all the more, but to lead her to true freedom.

This is what Christ came to do: to liberate and heal us. But he does not do so by means of an alternate reality – for example, by helping us to “self-identify” as healed, as if our problems were just a question of psychology. No, he wants to heal us at the root, deep within. That is not possible without rooting out the source of our ill – namely, the sins we have committed in our thoughts and in our words, in what we have done and what we have failed to do.

We need to go back to another encounter that God had – with our first parents. After they had committed that first sin, which no doubt filled them with immense shame, they tried to hide from him. He came to seek them out also, calling out after them. Then he confronted them about their sin, and in the course of that meeting, promised to send the Redeemer. We have to face our sin head-on to be freed from it! Otherwise, we get caught up in isolation and fear.

What these scriptural scenes teach us is that even when we are afraid of the world around us or even of our own shadow, God is not afraid of us; indeed, he seeks us out all the more. If we but crack open the door of our heart, we find him there loving us, inviting us, waiting to lead us to a place of freedom. But sometimes we do lock the door tight. For example, we stay away from confession; we try to self-identify as healed, rather than letting the Lord do the work.

Hence our psalm response today reminded us, “If today you hear his voice, harden not your hearts”. Don’t shut the door tighter; rather, throw it open to God. Invite him into your fears. Nothing he finds when you let him in will surprise him: he already knew about it all when he died for it – when he died for you and me – on the Cross. No amount of rationalization or psychologizing will ever give us true peace; only Jesus Christ can do that. And he will, if we let him in to do his good work.