

Homily

Lent 3 (A)

15 March 2020

There was something quite different in the way Jesus acted.

The Pharisees and teachers of the law said, "This man welcomes sinners," and others, that he went to be "the guest of a sinner."

He was even called "a friend of sinners".

Unlike the Pharisees and others, who avoided all social contact with sinners, Jesus put himself alongside the wrongdoers.

In the end, even the way he was crucified – between two robbers - was symbolic of the same.

The gentle and patient approach of Jesus to the sinner is nowhere more beautifully demonstrated than when he meets a Samaritan woman at the well.

St John tells us how Jesus stopped in the Samaritan town of Sychar at Jacob's well. He is wearied with the travelling and sits down at midday on the side of the well.

Eastern women go to the well in the early morning or in the evening, but now a woman comes to draw water at the hottest time of the day.

Jesus perceives her problem and asks, as if in passing, "Will you give me a drink?"

With a *gentle introduction*, Jesus strand by strand draws out the whole tangled mess of the woman's life and as the story unfolds we hear how the Samaritan woman experienced Jesus's gentle but searching spiritual interrogation.

The gospel doesn't tell us explicitly whether Jesus pronounced her sins forgiven, but his attitude showed *without words* that he empathised with the woman's problem, and *the woman's* sense of liberation is evident, as she runs into town leaving her water jar behind.

What we have here is a woman who is jaded by life.

She has been around and around, riding the merry-go-round of life and she is worn out from it. She has tried drinking from every well around her, but she has left them all just as thirsty as she was when she came.

But then Christ offers her an opportunity to find everything she has been looking for.

Jesus is not blind to her chequered past - he knows the seriousness of her sin, but he looks at her through the eyes of love and grace.

He takes her from where he finds her and leads her to where she needs to be, to the point of taking a drink of living water from the well of faith, that satisfies her in the depths of her soul.

This morning we come to visit this well of living water and this is not our first visit. We have drunk from it many times before, but it's possible that we are feeling a bit like Robert Robinson, an English clergyman who lived in the 18th century.

Robinson was a gifted pastor and preacher; and a highly gifted poet and hymn writer. However, after many years as an Anglican priest his faith began to drift. He left the ordained ministry and ended up in France, where he fell into loose living and drank from all the wells on offer.

One night he was riding in a carriage with a Parisian socialite who had recently been converted to Christianity.

She was interested in his opinion on some poetry she was reading:

*Come thou Fount of every blessing,
tune my heart to sing thy grace,
streams of mercy never failing
call for hymns of loudest praise.*

When she looked up from her reading she noticed that Robinson was crying.

"What do I think of it?" he asked in a broken voice. "I wrote it. But now I've drifted away from him and can't find my way back."

"But don't you see" the woman said gently, "The way back is written right here in the third line of your poem: *Streams of mercy never failing*. Those streams are flowing even here in Paris tonight."

May we experience those streams of living mercy flowing here in Coventry this morning, and, like Robinson did, recommit ourselves to following Christ.

Fr Paul