

“Sacrament of Reconciliation” - 3rd Sunday of Lent (A)

In today's Gospel, Jesus teaches many extraordinary things but it is not his teaching that causes the woman at the well to wonder if he is the Christ. Rather, as she says, 'Come and see a man who told me everything I did.' What brings the woman to faith is that with Jesus she looks steadily at her own life - in her case her five husbands - and comes to see how it falls short of a true life with God. And she feels safe doing this because she knows Jesus is on her side.

The Gospel writer, John, tells us that it is the sixth hour when Jesus sits down at the well or, as we would call it, midday. That is an unusual time for a woman to be collecting water. The sun will be high and it will be hot. Normally, you collect your water in the cool of the morning. But this woman is unacceptable to the other women because, as we learn, of her private life. So she has probably been forced to come later in the day. And Jesus is doing something highly unusual and highly risky in talking to her. Not just because she is a Samaritan but because she is a woman on her own, because of her reputation and because wells are where you would go, after the respectable women have left, to pick up a prostitute. And so we see the greatness of Jesus' love - he is taking a huge risk for her sake - and so she feels safe when he challenges her state of life.

Quite often people criticise the Church or stop practising their faith because there is something going on in their life which is in opposition to Catholic teaching. So feeling condemned, they - quite understandably - reject that which they believe is rejecting them. And, God knows, at times individuals within the Church have taught in harsh words and without, seemingly, much love. But because of his love and because of the woman's surviving openness to God, Jesus is able to challenge her and begin her on the path to conversion. Rarely do we come to faith because of simple intellectual assent to teachings of the Church. Rather God speaks to our heart, we see our life for what it is, we choose to change and then belief in Church teaching follows. There can be no true faith without conversion. Faith grows only where, safe in the knowledge we are loved, evil is rejected and Christ and his teaching is accepted. In a moment we shall pray for that in their journey of faith they may reject evil and embrace Christ.

This is why we keep Lent - to be converted. At Baptism we were given to the Lord but as we get older we need to daily recommit ourselves and when we have rejected him by our actions we recommit ourselves through the Sacrament of Reconciliation. But that can only happen - and this is the point I want to make - if we are examining daily our conscience. Like you and me that woman was simply living her life but then Christ interrupted. Part of the Christian life is to allow ourselves to be interrupted - especially during Lent - and examine the way we live. If we don't, faith will not grow. But if we do examine our conscience in the light of Church teaching we shall grow. And we have nothing to fear or kick against because Christ loves us and he is only guiding us to what will truly be our happiness; as Jesus said: 'If you only knew what is God is offering you.'