3rd Sunday in Lent 2023

Life is often compared to a journey, and when employing this comparison, Pope Francis adds, “but when we stop, things don’t go right”. We all encounter various obstacles in this life, and these can stop us in our tracks. Such obstacles may be in the form of disappointments with oneself, or with others; or serious problems within the family; or the frustration of living with our own sinful prejudices and habits which seem to come between ourselves and God. As a result, many are weighed down by the burdens of life, and find it difficult to find a way ahead. This was the plight was the Samaritan woman whom we meet in today's Gospel, but her story is not her’s alone, it is also our story, our journey.

The Gospel narrates the story of “The woman at the well” in such a way that we can see how patiently Jesus helped her to identify the obstacles in her life, and thus enabled her to find a way forward. The first obstacle noted by the Gospel was the burden of her religious and racial prejudice – Samaritans and Jews were bitter enemies. Jesus had merely asked her for a drink, but detect the sarcastic tone of her response; *“What? You are a Jew and you ask me, a Samaritan, for a drink?”* Jesus doesn't respond to this “jibe”, he knows that deeply ingrained prejudices cannot be set aside instantly.

Undeterred by the woman’s antagonistic attitude, Jesus persevered by saying to her, *“If you only knew what God is offering”*, you would be the one to ask for a drink and he would give you *“living water”.* But now she encountered yet another obstacle – that of misunderstanding – she thought that Jesus was offering water from another well, and by her asking in response, “*are you greater than Jacob who gave us this well?”,* sheimplied, “Who do you think you are?”

But Jesus didn’t give up; he went on to explain *“living water”* as water that will permanently end thirst. Again, she misunderstood, but at least he had caught the her interest, as the thought of not having to go to the well every day to draw water appealed to her - *“Sir”,* she said, *“give me some of that water, so that I may never get thirsty”.* Although she had yet to recognise it, it was not water for which she thirsted, but Jesus saw the real thirst in her heart – she yearned to be loved. Jesus’ comment, *“for although you have had five, the one you have now is not your husband”,* was less of a moral judgement, and more a recognition that this woman, with a string of broken relationships behind her, experienced herself as unloved. At this she perceived Jesus to be “a man of God” – *“I see you are a prophet, sir”;* later she will tell her neighbours, *“He has told me all I have ever done”.*

Now comes another obstacle disguised as a “What about” question. The Samaritan woman had discovered that she couldn’t trust her unworthy husbands, and wondered could she even trust God, and which God - that of her people, or that of the Jews. It is all too easy to get lost in “what aboutery” questions. Jesus confronted her with the truth about himself; *“I am the Christ”.* She must now make a decision – for or against faith in Jesus. It is a personal decision.

A far-from-perfect past is not an uncommon obstacle to conversion - mistakes in the past, bad decision now regretted, complicated situations in the present, can weigh heavily and may seem to create an insurmountable obstacle between ourselves and God. While the truth of one's situation needs to be honestly acknowledged, note that Jesus didn’t say to the Samaritan woman, “Come back after you straighten out your life”*.* We learn that Jesus never closes the door on a conversation; rather, he keeps open the lines of communication; just as he gently guides the Samaritan woman down a more positive path, he will do the same for each of us, regardless of our anxieties, worries, or burdens. Perhaps this Lent, he is sitting by the well waiting for you – not Jacob's Well, but the sacramental well of Penance, from which flows the “living water” that quenches the thirst of the human heart. With Jesus, it is possible to surmount every obstacle.

*“Lord Jesus, look upon us this day!*

*So many obstacles seem to come between us and you;*

*yet we thirst for love and peace.*

*Pour the living water of your love into our hearts”.*  **Amen.**