

Homily for the 3rd Sunday in Lent 2024 Year B

There is almost a tangible feeling of frustration in Christ's conversation with the Samaritan woman in today's Gospel. A simple thing like a request for a drop of water becomes complicated by religious differences.

The Samaritan woman was amazed that Christ would even consider speaking to her. The practising Orthodox Jews were so disdainful of the descendants of former Jews who split from the Old Kingdom of Israel and the worship of God in the Temple of Israel and went on to worship another God in the high places and mountains of Samaria.

To a Jew, a Samaritan was unclean, an outcast and the lowest of the low.

And in the middle of His conversation with the Samaritan woman, Christ said something amazing that can easily be missed in all that talk about water. He said that "the time will come when true worship will be done in spirit and in truth".

What did He mean?

One radical interpretation is that all of this has no real value in God's sight. It does not matter how elaborate or beautiful the liturgy and the surroundings in which it is celebrated, be it Bushey, St Peter's in Rome, Westminster Abbey, the Mosque in Mecca, the Golden Temple in Amritsar, or the Buddhist shrines in Japan. All of the material ways of worshipping God are just so much noise and glitter in God's sight. If all of that could pass away it would not matter.

That would be a little too extreme, but there is, nonetheless, a kernel of truth in it. Let us see if we can discover what it is.

The response of man to God, of creature to Creator, is always one of worship. But how and what we worship has often been conditioned by where we were born and the culture that we were brought up in. For thousands of years, those two things affected the way that man conceived of God or the gods, and how they related to Him. In the presence of his God man felt mixed emotions, love, awe, reverence or even fear, and he expressed those in the rituals of his worship, the words of his prayers, music, or dance; especially in the buildings or the sites where it was that those rituals occurred. Underneath all of this, of course, was the sincere but mistaken belief that he was not only in touch with

God, but that he, in a sense, had a monopoly or possessed God. Any other tribe, people or community who made a similar claim was fiercely resisted, hence the savagery of the many religious wars down the years, including the present day. Now the greatest insight contained in the first two Commandments to Moses was not only that there was only one God, and that he was to be worshipped, but that ritual expressions like images or statues could not contain Him. God could not be captured and held in an image or in a temple; He utterly surpassed all of that.

God is Pure Spirit. He is utterly and eternally boundless, and nothing can contain Him, not even the universe.

The way that God exists in Himself is utterly different to the way that every created thing exists. It was the common experience of the great thinkers and mystics of different religions and cultures that the deeper they moved into the vast mystery of God, in their thoughts and their prayers, the less they felt they could say about Him. Human words and concept proved more and more inadequate. In the end they failed. The human mind was left to contemplate its understanding of God in an imageless silence. Unfortunately, that is not much use to us.

At the ordinary, everyday level of human existence, the human mind must use concepts, words, mental pictures, or ideas; that is how it works and how we communicate with each other.

We have no idea of what Pure Spirit is. They are two human words that we placed together to try to describe it to ourselves. But we have no experience of it and cannot have, this side of eternity. It doesn't, therefore, tell us an awful lot about God; it tells us more of what He is not. He is not created matter in any shape or form.

So, we are moving to an understanding of an image of God that you cannot see, touch, taste or smell; a God that is, and must necessarily be, so totally other than that is frightening, and of no consolation in times of trouble or distress.

And that is part of the great Grace and Mercy of the incarnation of God becoming Man. In Christ we are given something tangible, something in human shape and form that we can relate to. We can form pictures of Him, muse on His words and His teachings. In Christ, we are caught up in the love of the God we cannot see. Saint Paul says, "Christ is the image of the unseen God".

So, we worship God. We worship Him in the person of Christ, we worship Him after the example of Christ in the Eucharist, we worship Him as followers of Christ in the Church that He founded in some 2000 years of traditional prayer, hymns, liturgy, music, and the visual arts.

The spiritual part of man provides the material for his worship of God. But it is not the worship in spirit and in truth that Christ refers to in the Gospel. Indeed, the followers of Christ are as deeply divided by their own forms of worship, as they are from people of other religions. The way that man worships God this side of eternity with words, images and beautiful ritual can be a powerful force for creating and sustaining a community of faith; but it is flawed in that it also has a terrible potential and capacity to divide and destroy communities. It can set man against his fellow man, all in the name of the glory of God.

That “worship in spirit and in truth” that Christ refers to can perhaps only be that moment when each of us beholds God face to face, and sees Him as He really is, undistorted by words and images, and are caught up eternally in a love and worship that unites and never divides. All of that is for eternity.

The lesson to be learned and lived here and now must be that of more humility and tolerance when each of us stands in prayer and worship, be it private or public, before God.

There is only one God, and we all seek to drink from the same well, as the font of our eternal life. If our thoughts and words about God and our worship of God split and divide us asunder, then in God's sight it is we who must acknowledge that we have an enormous problem, and the problem has to be solved, not glorified.

Perhaps we are only just beginning to move towards this truer worship that Christ speaks of and prays for, when all that divides us begins to dissolve and fade away in the light of each discovered and shared truth that unites us.