Homily for the Third Sunday in Lent 2026 Year A

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, so disdainful was the practising orthodox Jew about these descendants of former Jews, who split from the old Kingdom of Israel and the worship of God in the Temple of Jerusalem, to worship another God in the high places and mountains of Samaria. To a Jew a Samaritan was unclean, an outcast, and considered the lowest of the low.

In the middle of His conversation with the Samaritan woman Christ says something pretty amazing that can easily be missed in all that talk of 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. No matter how elaborate or beautiful the liturgy and the surroundings in which it is celebrated, be it the Sacred Heart in 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 that material way of worshipping God is just so much noise and glitter in God's sight. If all of that should pass away, it would not matter. That would be a little bit 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 men conceived of God or the gods and how they related to Him or them. In the presence of his God, man felt mixed emotions, love, reverence, or even fear, and he expressed those in the rituals of his worship, the words of his prayers, music and dance, and especially in the buildings or the sites where he worshipped. Underneath all of this was the sincere but mistaken belief that not only was he in touch with God, but that he had a monopoly of 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 in history, down to even the present day. Now part of the great insight contained in the first two commandments to Moses was not only that there was only one God, that he was to be worshipped, but that ritual icons or images could not contain his presence. God could not be captured and held in a man-made object. God utterly surpassed all of that.

God was, and is, pure spirit. He is utterly and eternally boundless. 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 as 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 concepts proved more and more inadequate, and in the end failed. The human mind was left to contemplate its understanding of God in an image-less silence.

But in the ordinary everyday level of our human existence, our human mind has to use concepts, words, mental pictures, and ideas. That is how our thoughts work and how we communicate with each other.

We have no idea of what Pure Spirit is. It is just two human words that we place together to try to describe to ourselves that which we have no experience of, and will have no experience of, 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's not created matter in any way, shape or form.

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

And this 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, form pictures of, and muse on His words and His teachings. In Christ we are caught up in the love of the God we cannot see. As 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 tradition of prayer, hymns, liturgy, music and the visual arts. The spiritual part of mass provides the material for our worship of God.

This 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 also flawed in that it additionally has the terrible potential and capacity to divide and destroy communities, to set man against his fellow man, all in the name of the Glory of God.

That phrase, “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 we see Him as He really is, undistorted by words and images, and we are caught up in a love and worship that unites and never divides. All of that is for eternity.

The lesson to be learnt and lived, here and now, has to be that of more humility and tolerance, when each of us, whether in private or in public, stands in prayer and worship 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 have to acknowledge that we have a problem that has to be solved, not glorified.

Perhaps we only just begin to move towards this truer worship that God speaks off and prays for; when all that divides us begins to dissolve and fade away in the light of each discovered and shared truth that ultimately unites us.