

Rev. Derek Fairman

3rd Sunday of Lent A

In the Gospel, the Lord Jesus meets the Samaritan woman at the well. Initially she is hostile to the Lord Jesus. She is probably hostile towards Him because He is a Jew and she is a Samaritan, but she is likely hostile to many other people. Sometimes people that we meet in life are pleasant in public, until others get to know them better. Other people are harsh on the outside, but actually kind on the inside. The Samaritan woman is more like the second kind of person.

The Lord Jesus reached out to her, and her hostility initially came through. The Lord Jesus might have given up after her initial hostility, but He did not. He felt that it was important to brush aside the hostility to get to the kindness that was hidden deep within. So, instead of giving up and leaving her to her own devices, the Lord decided to continue to have a conversation with her.

Eventually her attitude changes. She becomes more receptive to what the Lord Jesus is trying to explain to her. She opens up to the Lord, and she wants to learn more. It was no doubt the Lord's kindness to her that brought out her own kindness. If He had walked away from her hostile attitude, then she might not have found that kindness within herself.

There is a wonderful depiction of this encounter between the Lord Jesus and the Samaritan woman by the artist Henrik Semiradski. In this depiction, the Samaritan woman is beautifully adorned, and yet her expression reveals both doubt and emotional distance. The gold jewels are contrasted with the pain underneath the surface. The Lord Jesus is depicted as calm and instructive.

I think that in some ways, the Samaritan woman is a great figure of the Church. There is great beauty in the Church, but there is a lot of ugliness too. There are many reasons to walk away, to give up and write the Church off as hostile and unfeeling. There are many reasons to respond to that ugliness in the Church by simply distancing oneself.

Yet, is that what the Lord Jesus did to the Samaritan woman? Did the Lord simply say to Himself, after her second hostile response, "I've had enough?" No, the Lord Jesus did not let that get to Him. The Lord Jesus had to get through the emotional hurt and pain, and the negative attitude to get to her heart. That was not easy, but the Lord did so. He made a kind of sacrifice: He endured the woman's negativity in order to bring her healing.

The Lord Jesus did not ignore the woman's problems; instead, He faced them head-on. He confronted her directly about her husband, or actually, her lack of one. Her situation mirrored the situation of her people: the people of Samaria had actually worshipped God at one time, but later started worshipping other gods. So, the idolatry of the people could be likened to a woman abandoning one husband and marrying another husband (or several). The point is that He did not simply ignore her situation, but gave her hope that she could find her way back to God.

The same is true of the Church today. No, we cannot ignore the problems that exist in the Church. We have to face them. However, that does not mean walking away; that means confronting the problems. Is that easy? No, it is not. Yet the Lord Jesus made His way through the Samaritan's woman's initial hostility, to reveal her kindness. The Church has an inner beauty, and the Lord Jesus can reveal that beauty to us.

Perhaps we have felt some coldness or distance when dealing with the Church. Clergy are not exempt from experiencing something like that from the Church as well. What we need to keep in mind is that beneath the exterior beauty, and then beneath the ugliness, lies a deeper kindness and beauty. The Church is where we find all spiritual goods. The Church is where we find the life of grace which strengthens us. What else do you find in the Church? Where do you see the inner beauty, the hidden beauty of the Church?

During those moments when we experience some harshness or coldness in the Church, or we experience some way in which the Church fails, it can be easy to give up. However, we want to imitate the Lord Jesus, who did not give up. He was able to overcome the Samaritan woman's hostility, and He can overcome any ugliness in the Church. The answer to the Church's problems are found within the Church, not outside of it.

We keep in mind the Virgin Mother of God, who is the perfect image of what the Church ought to be. She has an external beauty, and that reflects her supreme interior beauty. There is no ugliness in her. The Church as the Bride of Christ has the desire to imitate the Virgin Mary, and in some ways the Church does, but the Church falls short.

As we approach the altar, we know that the Lord will not give up on us, either. The Lord does not give up on anyone. There are those who might be hostile to the Church for some reason: because of some prejudice from a long time ago, because that person does not like the teachings of the Church, etc. We pray that the Lord will overcome all hostilities and that many may come to see the hidden beauty which the Church possesses.