

*5th Sunday in Ordinary Time – A Cycle
2005*

February 6,

INTRODUCTION

Ancient Babylon was in modern day Iraq, with its capital on the Euphrates River, less than 100 miles south of Baghdad. When the Babylonians conquered the Jews in 587 BC, they took most of the Jews off to Babylon as prisoners and slaves. This event, known as the Babylonian exile, lasted 50 years. When the Persians, people who lived in modern day Iran, conquered the Babylonians, the Persians allowed the Jews to return home. Most of those Jews who returned to Israel were the grandchildren of the ones who were taken into exile. When they got home to Israel, they found their cities and farms in the same deplorable state in which they had left them when they were originally conquered 50 years earlier. They had to rebuild everything, their farms, their homes, their businesses, their cities, their temple. And here is where our first reading comes in. Their efforts to survive created deep division in the community. It was survival of the fittest, and the poor and homeless were ignored. God is telling them that their selfish, self-centered, ‘every man for himself’ attitude was not going to be successful. If they wanted to grow and thrive, they had to start caring about each other. Justice, fairness, honesty and kindness would bring light into their darkness. Selfishness would bring continued suffering.

HOMILY

The words of Isaiah are as true now as they were 2500 years ago. We can make our world beautiful by the way we treat each other or we can make it a very unpleasant place to be. If everyone’s only concern is about themselves, the survival of the fittest, few will survive and not very happily. If we work together, we will do more than survive, we will thrive. As Ben Franklin said at the signing of the Declaration of Independence: “We must all hang together, or assuredly we shall all hang separately.” And Jesus, as he continues the Sermon on the Mount, tells us “you can do it.” “You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world.” When we think of salt, we think of how it makes our food

taste better, but we better not eat too much of it. It's a pretty cheap item in our world today, but at the time of Jesus it was a very valuable commodity. So valuable in fact that the word "salary" comes from the Latin word for salt: "sal." In those days it not only made food more tasty, but it was used very much like we use refrigeration today: as a preservative. There is no need to emphasize the importance of light on our world today as well as at the time of Jesus. Don't forget Jesus was talking to a large group of people, not just his picked Apostles. He was talking to fishermen, farmers, housewives, merchants, carpenters and stonemasons, old people and young. He told them: "You are the salt of the earth, you are the light of the world." God has given us the ability to bring light and joy to others in simple ways as well as in major ways.

I came across an interesting story to illustrate this. It is the story Art Linkletter tells about himself. He was the child of an unwed mother who gave him up for adoption. (It's a good thing he was born in 1912 rather than after 1973 when abortions became legal.) His adopting parents were warm and loving, but not very good providers. His father tried several careers, including preaching, and was a financial failure in each of them. At the tender age of 16, Art left home and hit the road as a hobo. Instead of finding his fortune as he set out to do, he almost got killed. A couple of tough guys found him and a buddy sleeping in a boxcar and robbed them. They almost shot them, but at the last minute thought differently about it. Instead, one of the guys who robbed him took pity on him and gave him back 30 cents out of the \$1.30 he stole from him. He thought Art might need to have something so he could buy himself some breakfast. His first job was sorting through discarded lemons from a fruit-packing plant, picking out the least rotten fruit and selling it door to door. Somewhere between that difficult start and today, Art became the star of two of the longest-running shows in broadcasting history, he became a successful businessman, author and lecturer. He was married to the same wife, had five children, seven grandchildren and 80 great grand children. He tells his story to encourage others who are at the lower rung of the economic ladder, who think they have few gifts or talents they can offer others. He said, "if I

could do it, you can too.” Jesus says: “you are the salt of the earth, you are the light of the world.” Amen.

3rd Sunday in Lent – A Cycle

February 27, 2005

Samaria was located half way between Galilee and Jerusalem. It covered an area roughly the size of Butler and Hamilton County put together. The trip from Galilee to Jerusalem took about three days on foot if the journey went through Samaria, but because of the animosity between the Jews and the Samaritans, often travelers would go around Samaria, making their trip longer. Jesus and his disciples took the shorter route, and they were about half way through Samaria when the events in today’s gospel took place. It was around noon and probably getting warm. Jesus sat down to rest. Most of the women in the vicinity would have been at the well early in the morning to get the water they needed for the day. Perhaps the woman in today’s gospel came to draw water at noon in order to avoid nasty looks or comments from the other women who may have looked down their noses at her because of her current unmarried situation. For any number of reasons, Jesus could have easily slipped away when she arrived. In addition to her unconventional living arrangement, she was a woman and a Samaritan. Jews had nothing to do with Samaritans and men usually did not speak with women in public. Rabbis would not even talk with their own wives in public. But Jesus did not walk away. Rather he asked for a drink.

I was on vacation last week. The priest at the church which I attended on the weekend preached for 25 minutes. I could easily talk for 25 minutes on today’s gospel, there are so many details that could be pointed out. But I won’t do that to you. There are a couple of things that do deserve a special mention.

Water is a major theme of the gospel. Jesus asked for a drink then offered the woman living water. The term was deliberately ambiguous. Ordinary people, of course, didn’t have running water in their homes. That’s why they all had to come to a well nearby to draw water. The

woman interpreted the term “living water” to mean a fountain or a spring. She had no idea that the living water Jesus was talking about was water that would lead to eternal life. Life, as we all know, depends on water. Recently in the news they have been talking about whether there was water on the planet Mars and if so how recently it existed there. The main issue, of course, is if water was there at one time, then life could have existed there too. There is no life without water. Similarly, we Christians see our own beginning in the life of grace starting with the water, the water of baptism.

Another feature of today’s gospel is to notice this woman gradually coming to know Jesus in a fuller and deeper way. She initially addresses Jesus as “sir,” a polite title, then she recognizes him as a prophet, then she begins to believe he is the Christ, that is, the Messiah. In her excitement she forgot about the water she came to get (St. John tells us she left her water jar at the well) and she ran into town to tell everyone about him. The town itself concluded that he was even more than the Jewish Messiah, the savior of the Jews, but he was truly the savior of the world. [It is a journey parallel to the journey taken by those in the RCIA as they seek to know more and more about Jesus on their way to entering the Church at Easter.]

It might be worth noting that historically, after the resurrection of Jesus and the coming of the Holy Spirit on the Apostles at Pentecost, the Samaritans were very receptive to the preaching of the Apostles. Perhaps the events narrated in today’s gospel paved the way for their conversion.

Everything in today’s gospel started with a conversation between Jesus and the woman. And this is the point that impresses me the most. We’ll never get to know the Lord if we don’t take time to talk with him. He doesn’t show up in radiant light or thunder and lightning. He comes in ordinary ways, in the guise of a friend or even an adversary, in the words from a book, especially The Book which we call by its Greek name, the Bible. He shows up in an assembly of believers and in such simple

things as water, bread and wine. The important thing is to make time to listen, to respond, to have a conversation, to do more than just tell him what we want him to do for us. We never get to know anyone in life without spending time with them. If the Lord is important to us, we need to set time aside to spend with him too. Amen.