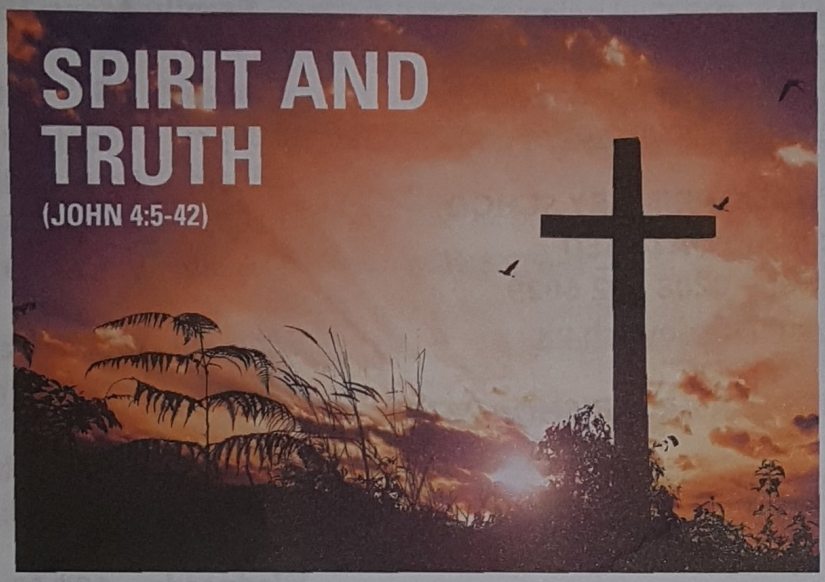
15 MARCH 2020

Sunday Message

3RD SUNDAY OF LENT

THE WORD

Year A • Psalter Week 3



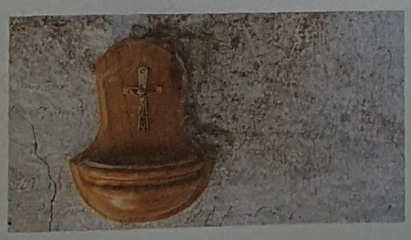
The characters who appear with Jesus in the Fourth Gospel represent different kinds of persons and different reactions to Jesus.

In today's extract from the Gospel according to John, we meet the familiar figure of the Samaritan woman at the well. She is, first and foremost, a woman. She belongs to a group of people, the Samaritans, whom the Jewish people regarded as not being members of the people of Israel, no matter what their claims about their origins: their rival sanctuary to Jerusalem had been destroyed by the warrior Jewish high priest roughly 150 years earlier. We find traces of the hostility of the Samaritans towards Jewish pilgrims from Galilee in the Gospel accounts.

Yet here, Jesus takes the initiative in speaking to this woman, much to her surprise. As they talk, her understanding of who Jesus might be develops: she refers to him as a Jew, then as a prophet, and ends up wondering if he might be the Messiah/Christ. Although she does not come to believe in Jesus herself, her wondering about him to the townspeople leads them to believe in Jesus. She is thus the catalyst for their putting their faith in Jesus, not on her word, as hearsay is not enough, but because they have experienced him for themselves. ■

DO

Make the Sign of the Cross with holy water. Consider using the rest of Lent to decide whether or not you really want to renew your baptismal promises.



LEARN

The Jews held that the Samaritans were settlers imposed by the Assyrian conquerors in place of the Israelite population of the northern kingdom after the defeat in 722 BC.

The Samaritans claimed that they were true Israelites left behind after the deportation.

The Samaritans built a rival temple on Mount Gerizim: this was destroyed by the high priest, John Hyrcanus, in 129 BC.

REFLECT

Today, and on the next two Sundays, we hear a long reading from the Fourth Gospel. These extracts are given for us to reflect upon as we approach Easter, when new members will be added to our community as disciples of Jesus.

For John the evangelist, faith is not something we possess, but something we do. It is also a decision. Many "cradle Catholics" are somewhat envious of converts: they feel that they would like to have had the chance really to decide for themselves, rather than having been baptised as infants and brought up in the faith without having to make their own mind up and say for themselves, "Yes, Lord, I believe." Somehow, renewing their baptismal promises is not quite the same. One of the reasons people leave the Church is because they never truly believed to begin with: the mere fact of being baptised does not confer faith. Baptism is (ideally) the external sign that we have made our own decision. We may have difficulties with certain aspects of our faith, but the essential point is that we have a real, personal relationship with Jesus, which must develop as we ourselves grow, otherwise it will wither and die. These three Gospel extracts illustrate for us how a person's faith develops through questioning.

The woman tries to engage Jesus on details in the differences between their two traditions, but Jesus brushes these aside. Worship in spirit and truth, that is, worshipping God with one's whole life, is what true, authentic faith means: questions of place and ritual are secondary. Quarrels about liturgy and the like can be a useful distraction from the deeper questions of faith. ■

SAY

Lord, I believe: help my unbelief!

(Mark 9:24)