

**Sunday, March 15<sup>th</sup>, 2020, Lent 3A**

**Readings: Exodus 17:1-7, Psalm 95, Romans 5:1-11, John 4:5-42**

## **Becoming Truly Human and Christian: Confront the Absurd!**

### **Introduction**

Last week, as we read the story of Nicodemus, we discovered that becoming human through Christian faith, includes, among other things, the challenge of seeing through two eyes not just one, seeing reality and others with both breadth of mind and depth of perspective. Nicodemus' problem was that he was in the classic sense 'one-eyed': he saw reality in a strictly closed way - his theology was narrow his faith was confined, as everything was channelled through his exclusive claim to be "a son of Abraham". To such a mindset, Jesus counter-assertion that "God loves the world" stood out as dangerously chaotic, while none-the-less novel, attractive. In one sweep, there was good news and bad news for this man: the good news was that he no longer had to carry the burden of preferment, of chosen-ness, he no longer had to carry a conceptual picture of the world in terms of *us and them*. The bad news was that he needed to understand that the grace of God was not his to monopolize, that it transcends his national and religious credal claims. Nicodemus: see with two eyes, not one!

Today we have another conversation: this time between Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well. But I don't want to start there. I want to start with a modern piece of theatre: "Waiting for Godot" by the Irish play-write Samuel Beckett. First performed in 1953, the play is strange. It is about two down-and-out men, Estragon and Vladimir, who spend the whole play waiting for someone called Godot...who never shows, who never turns up. "Let's go" "We can't" "Why not"? "We're waiting for Godot"

Let's do three things: first get our heads around this play and its significance; second ask how it helps us deal with the human drama of the woman at the well. Finally, let's think about this Biblical story more broadly in terms of what it asks of us.

### **Waiting for Godot**

*Waiting for Godot* was born from a school of thinking that arose after World War II, a school called *Absurdism*. Beckett, and other playwrights and philosophers had worked in the resistance in Nazi occupied Paris. Victory having been proclaimed, they were left with the moral question of so what? For them, the issue was, why is there this gulf between human need and the *unreasonable silence of the world*. Many had seen death, violence on a large and an organized scale, evil at work, and were overwhelmed with the way things *just moved on*. The French existentialist philosopher and partner of the acclaimed feminist, Simone Beauvoir, said this: "humanity must live in a world that is and will be forever hostile or indifferent to them. The universe will never truly care for humanity the way we seem to want it to". In sum then, the difficulty for us all as human beings is that we carry within, this desire for meaning in what appears to be a meaningless universe. How can we confront the absurd?

Waiting for Godot is all about this: the compulsion to find meaning when there is apparently nothing there, the need to wait for Godot who will never come. During the play, Estragon and Vladimir try all sorts of methods to confront the absurdity of reality, the craziness of an uncaring universe: they entertain the ideas of suicide, distraction in food, or their shoes, religion, singing as if in a music hall. By the end of the play, it is clear that Godot is not coming: these two men wait in vain for meaning, meaning that will never arrive because the universe is Absurd, all is Absurd. There is however one character, who is really the hero of this tale: the slave, Lucky, who has the courage to face up to the reality of the Absurd: someone who knows their life may be pointless, but who gets on with it anyway. When finally, Lucky speaks, Estragon, Vladimir and Pozzo are deaf to him: they cannot understand a word he says.

### **The Woman at the Well**

Let's take this tale of twentieth century consciousness and despair to the story of the Woman at the Well! In doing so, I am suggesting that this apparent modern awareness of the Absurd is not so modern after all: that we human beings have been wired in a similar way for millennia; that while contexts change, our reactions and responses both emotional and rational, have varied less than we would like to imagine.

Let me make some observations: first, let's get something straight: there is no suggestion that this woman has been immoral, that she is a woman of the night: she could well have been one who has suffered multiple husbands who have died for legitimate reasons. Nevertheless, there *is* a suggestion here that she is marginal, for she is *alone* at the well, the social hub for the community in the mornings and evenings, but deserted at midday. In fact, she is marginal, not only to the town community as their probable scapegoat, but also to the Jews, as a Samaritan: a cross-breed, and heretic to boot. Second, she is well aware of the absurdity of her situation. She affirms the cultural belief that *one day* the messiah will come and make sense of things: one day "we'll get the whole story". But until then, she accepts that she just has to do the best she can, accepts the situation, but to her credit, faces up to reality, squares up to the real with as much courage as she can muster: to live as does Lucky. Third, while accepting the Absurd, she has considerably more insight than Nicodemus. She contemplates that Jesus just *may* be the Messiah. What is extraordinary here is something that never occurs in the story of Nicodemus: this woman returns to her village and exclaims to the people "Come and see"! She empowers those very same villagers who have made her life a misery, to see something new, to become something other than what they have been: to put an end to the absurd, that they all live, victimizing, scapegoating each other in their drab everyday lives. **Finally, and this is the point, this is the thing: Jesus is unequivocal in his claim that she, they, need wait no longer, that the time is now, the new age has come, is in him! In him Absurdity ends.** It is no longer just a question of coping, but of facing up to reality, rebelling against the constraints, actively building meaning – personal, social, political meaning – amid the absurdity of things.

### **The End**

May I end with an example of what this may look like. If ever there were a case of living the absurd, it is that of the Pentecostal communities of southern Chile. Born and raised as coal miners, their experience of life was, to quote the political philosopher, Thomas Hobbes, poor, nasty, brutish and short. Because of their exclusion, Pentecostal faith was particularly important to their identity, their sense-of-self. But equally, this profound Christian faith was really a haven for them, a haven of the masses, an escape from the hostility of the world around them. Not coincidentally, their perception of conversion *to* Christ, was conversion *from* the world, *out* of the world: how could it be other? And yet, as I sat each evening in their leaky chapels, sharing the faith with them, it seemed to me that the Christ of the Gospels challenged his people, like the woman at the well, to *not* hide in the absurdity of their banishment, but *to* resist it, *to* face up to the folly and 'normality' of destructive social, economic, political and cultural structures. So began a work of theological partnership, between the Pentecostal organization SEPADE and the Pentecostal communities, beginning reading the scriptures in a new way, where these communities 'girded their loins', refusing to be simply invisible, hidden-away in their chapels. Today, because of the theological awakening of these communities, they are no longer hidden, secluded, quiet, apologetic. They are now vocal, engaged, present, in the affairs of their societies, as indeed they should be, and should always have been.

What happened here? Why the change? These people, these people of humble roots, these people who had been excluded for generations, began to see that within the gospels there are not just religious stories, mythologies, to be ritually read each Sunday, while life, or what passes for it, goes on. These Pentecostals, as did the woman at the well, discovered a profound truth: that the Gospel, is not just information, it does not just seek to notify us of a loving God. Rather, it seeks to achieve what it says: that the news that the kingdom has arrived, means that *we must make it arrive*.

This is what compelled Martin Luther King and Mahalia Jackson and the black Christian communities of Let us watch this clip, filmed weeks before his death, as they sing and put into practical effect the liberation of the kingdom of God, the fight for civil rights.