

Homily for the Third Sunday of Lent,
March 6-7, 2010. “A”

A few years back I recall listening to Bill O’Riley on the Radio. He proclaims that he gets upset with people who filter points of view through their own prejudices, that’s why he calls his Radio and Television show, the “No Spin Zone.”

At this particular time, Saddam Hussein had not been captured. Mr. O’Riley was upset with the Pope for not supporting the war in Iraq. Mr. O’Riley proclaimed that the Holy Father would be responsible for the suffering of the Iraqi Citizens under the regime of Saddam Hussein. I guess that Mr. O’Riley wasn’t listening when the Pope clearly and forcefully called for Saddam to disarm. Mr. O’Riley, while busy filtering the Pope’s position through his particular prejudices, made an interesting comment. He said, “*All the Pope does is sit in the Vatican and prays*”, implying that there is no real good; no real power in prayer.

Whatever your opinion on the war in Iraq, the Gospel presents a different spin on things, a spin that the Holy Father seems to be trying to bring to our attention. It is the same spin that Christ presents in his encounter with the Samaritan woman. The question of whether or not the war was justified is not answered, just as Christ doesn’t answer the question of who was right, the Jews or the Samaritans. Christ asks a deeper question, “In the face of sin, hatred and injustice in the world, what are *we* doing to seek holiness in *our* lives. What have we done to overcome the sin we are responsible for?”

We will only know peace and justice in the world if we first seek truth and live justice in our own lives.

We have seen it so often in the past and it happens today. Genocide, "ethnic cleansing," notions of racial purity or national superiority all begin with hatred and prejudice in the individual human heart. Governments, armies, and even churches embrace the prejudices of their members. We too, have contributed to these hatreds because we have not been willing to do the work of acknowledging sin in our own lives. It is easier to sit back and blame others for what is wrong with the world. We fail to live justice and peace in our own lives because we do not value prayer enough or take it seriously enough. We should not be surprised then, when unrest or war breaks out among nations.

We do not easily accept the challenge to fight sin. We will love our neighbors as ourselves, providing they think or act like us. This is the heart of the dilemma in the Gospel today. Here is Christ, the Messiah sent to the chosen people, talking quietly to a woman of Samaria, and not only talking, but asking her for what he needs. To the Jews of that time the Samaritans were despised and driven out of Israel. Although descended from Abraham, the Jews viewed Samaritans as unclean, impure, and their religion was considered idolatrous because they worshipped in the wrong place.

But the Samaritans themselves didn't take all this lying down. Jews were often attacked as they took the pilgrim's road to Jerusalem. In the middle of the night, Samaritans scattered human bones over the temple floor, defiling the precincts. In return the Jews had destroyed the

Samaritan's temple, and in spite of their meticulous observance of the Law of Moses the Samaritans became an outcast and rejected people.

Yet here is Jesus, a Jew, obviously a man of presence and authority, sitting by a Samaritan well and asking for a drink. He has no bucket or drinking cup. He asks for water from a woman whose vessels are considered defiled. The woman is surprised almost to rudeness by Jesus' unexpected behavior. And so she questions him in a manner that echoes the old feud between their people: "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?"

Jesus then begins to lead her gently to a deeper and more important understanding of things. Jesus didn't settle the feud between the Jews and the Samaritans. He didn't take sides. That was beside the point. Jesus showed another path altogether, the only path that would lead to a resolution of conflict, injustice and hatred. Jesus talks of giving water that will permanently cure her thirst, water that, like a spring within, will well up into Eternal Life. ***Jesus shows the woman a path to holiness that is only found in communion with Christ; a way that is only found through prayer.***

Still she fails to see the point. She cannot, at first see that the thirst she was experiencing was her thirst for her lost dignity. She was thirsting for her true self. She does not understand that Jesus is calling her to holiness, and to act justly and to live in truth. She asks for a supply of water that will excuse her from the chore of filling buckets.

To point her toward his message, Jesus shows her the truth about the life she leads. She is asked to fetch her

husband, and with this confrontation of the mess she has made of her life, Jesus reveals to her a more important truth, the wonderful statement that the one who is showing such a gentle and compassionate interest in her is the Messiah. "I am he" — the "I am" is an echo of the proclamation of God's authority revealed to Moses: "I am who I am." Here is a glimpse into the dynamic power of prayer; the effect of communion with Christ. In prayer the truth is revealed to us, the lie of our sins is exposed, but the power of God's love heals us and restores us to dignity.

So what does Christ do? He does not take sides in a national and religious dispute. He does not offer arbitration or condemn the participants. Instead he offers a personal challenge. For the Samaritan Woman it was a challenge to overcome sin, live the truth, act in justice and reconnect in compassion to her home and neighborhood.

Jesus asks us to value eternal life more than things, to trust in his care more than security and to seek our dignity as his sons and daughters more than pride. Jesus offers the indwelling of his Spirit, water that will counteract the barrenness of hatred and misunderstanding. "Seek first the Kingdom of God and his righteousness and all these things will be given you besides."

Much is offered to us in today's gospel. Christ calls us into communion with him through prayer so that he may give us his grace. His grace will transform us into agents of his peace, justice and love. Our faith in Christ and our communion with him gives us a way to love all others as Christ loves us. Prayer has great power. It is the only power that will transform our world, because it begins with us.