

THIRD SUNDAY OF LENT (YEAR A)

March 15, 2020

Exodus 17:3–7 • Romans 5:1–2, 5–8 • John 4:5–42

I.

I baptized three children yesterday.

That rite underscores the power and significance of the sacraments at time when the world is reeling from the coronavirus pestilence.

As I explained to the parents, we were there, baptizing the children, because it's so important.

It's not just a nice ceremony.

Baptism is a pledge of eternal life.

It is the power of God at work in our lives.

That is why the Church always tries to administer the sacraments, even when the situation is grave.

It's difficult when the Church is unable to gather publicly for the sacraments.

The reason is that the Church is fundamentally a gathering; the word "church" means "assembly."

Our bishop has taken the step of dispensing or excusing persons especially vulnerable to the virus, those who care for them, and those who are concerned about public gatherings, from the obligation to attend Sunday Mass.

That was a good and prudent decision.

We are here to gather as a Church, to pray for those who cannot be here, and to offer the Eucharistic Sacrifice, as always, for the salvation of the world.

II.

A public health crisis, like a natural disaster,
can bring out the best or worst in people.

The best traits are calm, prudence, solidarity, and compassion.

Christians have a role to play in all of this.

We don't stop giving witness to our faith in difficult times;
the world needs our prayers, our hope, and our action.

The Second Vatican Council explained the Church's role in the world like this:

“The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men of this age,
especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes,
the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ” (*Gaudium et spes*, no. 1).

The theme of our diocesan bicentennial is also apt:

“Shine like stars in the world, as you hold fast to the word of life.”

(From St. Paul's Letter to the Philippians.)

III.

Today's Gospel reading is a portrait of Christian life:
the Samaritan woman, also known as the woman at the well.

The next three Sundays will feature dramatic readings from the Gospel of John.

In all three cases, John uses irony and double meaning.

Jesus is on a spiritual and heavenly level,
while his interlocutors or adversaries
are stuck on a merely material and earthly level.

Through these encounters, Jesus, who is enigmatic,
tries to bring the people around him to deeper faith.

The woman seeks water, a basic necessity;
Jesus offers her “living water,”
which is supernatural, eternal life.

Whereas the woman is thinking only of survival and existence,
Christ seeks true life and flourishing.

Of course, survival and existence are essential;
but they are the foundation of something even greater.

So, Jesus guides this woman along as the subject of the conversation meanders.

She thinks he's a prophet.

She contrasts the place of worship for a Samaritan versus for a Jew;
Jesus speaks of true worship that is not limited by place.

She expresses belief in the Messiah;
Jesus affirms that he is the Chosen One.

By the end of the story,
the woman and many of her fellow townspeople come believe in Christ.

During this public-health crisis,
we need to think about survival and well-being as well as eternity.

It's not one or the other; it's both.

The Church's role is to help keep calm,
contribute to the common good,
protect the vulnerable,
and help people to grasp that they are made for God and meant for God.

From the Second Vatican Council:

“The truth is that only in the mystery of the incarnate Word
does the mystery of man take on light. ...
For by His incarnation the Son of God has united Himself... with every man. ...
He merited for us life by the free shedding of His own blood. ...
By suffering for us He not only provided us with an example for our imitation,
He blazed a trail, and if we follow it,
life and death are made holy and take on a new meaning. ...
Through Christ and in Christ, the riddles of sorrow and death grow meaningful.
Apart from His Gospel, they overwhelm us.

Christ has risen, destroying death by His death;
He has lavished life upon us” (no. 22).

IV.

As your priest,

I would like to ask you to do the following during this difficult time,
so that the Church can fulfill its role in the world:

1. Remain calm and be patient.
2. Follow the safety precautions given by public-health officials,
and the religious one by our shepherd, Bishop Knestout.
3. Stay up to date because the situation is fluid.
4. Exercise prudence by thinking through comments and decisions.
5. Check in on those who are most vulnerable to the virus,
whether they be spouses, family members, or neighbors.
6. Pray, and receive the sacraments if you are able.

Here at the Cathedral,
as I've been informing you,
we have suspended religious education for children and youth,
and activities for adults.

The church will remain open for prayer, and Masses and confessions will continue.

I will keep you posted about any new developments.

Yesterday, in baptizing the children,
as their baptismal candles were given to their godparents,
I, in the name of the Church, said the following:
“This light is entrusted to you, to be kept burning brightly.”

That is the gift we have been given, Jesus Christ;
that is the gift we give to the world.