

# ***MARIAN***

*Magazine of  
Our Lady Help of Christians Parish, Eltham*

*August 2017*



## **Our Lady of good counsel (New Norcia, W.A.)**

This famous painting was given to New Norcia's founder, Bishop Salvado. When the Mission was threatened by fire, Salvado prayed before the flames with this painting, and the settlement was saved. The painting now hangs in the Church of the same name. Many of our parishioners have visited New Norcia.

## *A word from Father Kevin*

### *PREACHING: Adventure & Challenge, A Sacred Moment*

One doesn't get into priestly ministry primarily for one's own enjoyment and sense of fulfilment but there is one significant aspect of my priestly responsibilities that I do enjoy and find fulfilling and this is preaching the Word of God to His and my people.

We priests are privileged to share a unique ministry as leader of a parish community and preaching is a very special part of that. It is quite different preaching to people you don't know as against to people whom you have got to know, serve and work with over a period of time. It is interesting to hear priests refer to "my parish"; it grates on me a bit as I believe we should see it as "our parish", as I do not own or possess the parish, so it is essentially a relationship process not a unilateral one from top to bottom.

Perhaps the most common critique people make of Mass and the homily in particular is that they are *boring*. We preachers do inhabit a hotly competitive market of social media and other supposed forms of entertainment. We are not in the entertainment business but we are in the communication industry and we need to understand, respect and learn from our secular culture. In our case, Jesus is our inspiration as well as our exemplar and model. He spoke about life and often challenged people to see things from undreamed perspectives. His world-view was as far-reaching and profound as divinity itself, while being grounded in reality and focused on relationships and life's purpose/meaning - a truly incarnational approach. We preachers need a similar dynamic and positive life-centred vision.

My experience suggests that we do not have the luxury of being long-winded, cliché-driven or concentrate on doctrine; people prefer the personal/pastoral approach to the preachy/pedantic one. It is often better to pose questions rather to push solutions and people seem to sit up and listen if we honestly share personal examples from our experiences.

I am guessing I have given about 12,000 homilies over a forty-seven year period - I will leave it to parishioners and the Spirit for the final word as to their quality and impact, but we preachers usually have a fair idea whether we have preached well or not. For some direction I turn to St Paul's 1<sup>st</sup> letter to Corinthians, ch 3, vs 6-9 - "I did the *planting*, Apollo did the *watering* but God *made things grow*. Neither the planter nor the waterer matters: only God, who makes things grow. It is all one who does the planting and who does the watering and each will be duly paid according to their share in the work. We are fellow workers with God; you are God's farm, God's building".

Our preparation for preaching is long-term, medium term and short-term-:

- Long-term is our daily prayer life, Scripture reading, spiritual reading. My favourite spiritual writers are US Franciscan priest Richard Rohr and Canadian Oblate priest Ron Rolheiser whom I had for several days on a US sabbatical in 2006. His cheap Advent and Lent Daybreak Reflections are brilliant.
- Medium-term is our day-to-day contact with people with its many and varied relationships as well as hopefully gaining some learning and wisdom from all my contacts over the years and some life-changing and challenging experiences such as Marriage Encounter weekend and my initial years in Eltham.

- Short-term is deciding what material to present, writing it out, perhaps adding personal experiences and insights.

Our preparation at all these levels is obviously paramount but I need to remind myself that it does not all depends upon me and my human efforts - that is virtually heresy, because in the spiritual life, nothing primarily depends on us. It is interesting to know that there have been occasions when I thought the homily was not great but perhaps a week or so later, someone thanks me for an insight that I can barely recall; what we say is one thing; what people take from our words is another; who knows what the Spirit does with what we try to communicate! I also need to remind myself that all I can do is the *planning* with the worshipping community and the overall sense of warmth/welcome doing the *watering* with the Spirit working in and through all this to *set the scene* for someone's *heart* to be *moved* or *mind enlightened* or *spirit stirred*. Only the Spirit knows the ultimate outcome.

With long-term preparation I am pleased to say that I have a healthy daily prayer life and a profound love of and affection for God's Word in the Scriptures - I cannot get enough of it.

I combine the two on a daily basis as on Mondays I pray over next weekend's gospel, Tuesdays and Wednesdays on 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> readings for my half hour prayer/meditation. For the past twenty years or so, I have slowly worked my way through 99% of the Bible; I am now into the very last book, the intriguing and tricky *Book of Revelation*, also known as the *Apocalypse*. I must be close to retirement!

I use two bibles, one more scholarly *Jerusalem Bible*, the other with a strong social justice/human rights' emphasis *The Christian Community Bible*. Together they offer a healthy balance between scholarship and life.

Another part of my preparation is the study that I have done on various parts of the bible. I just love the Wisdom literature with its seven books such as Job, Proverbs, Wisdom, Ecclesiastes so I have written an article on them. After my daily prayer/meditation, I summarised the first five books, known as the Pentateuch, starting with Genesis and Exodus and I have done articles on prophets Hosea & Jeremiah, Maccabees, Mark's gospel and St Paul's role in Acts of Apostles.

For medium-term preparation I think of the many and varied experiences that I have had and how they have influenced me though it is often a matter of one step forward, two steps back.

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**"Blog unto others as you would have them blog unto you. Spam not, lest ye be spammed! Though I surf through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no virus..."**

For short-term preparation, I often choose material from one of six books by US pastor William Bausch; two of them are called *Once Upon a Gospel*; *Inspiring Homilies* and *Insightful Reflections* and *The Story Revealed: Homilies that Sustain, Inspire and Engage*; I believe they live up to the lofty claims of their titles. Bausch regularly offers gutsy and substantial stories and relevant personal experiences. It usually takes me two hours to write out the homily once I have chosen the material or if not, I use my own reflections.

I think it is important to vary the style of the homily from instructive, reflective, encouraging, challenging to personal sharing and occasional humour.

I believe I am preaching more energetically than ever in recent years as I have found reasonable peace with myself, life and the Lord and I am feeling very much at home here in Eltham. For these reasons I am confident and comfortable in sharing my personal story with all its glory and gore.

What gives the homily a real edge, I believe, is the passion and conviction with which we present it. It is important that we believe what we are saying and are seen to be making a genuine effort to put it into practice in our daily lives.

I really appreciate people's feedback about the homily and it's great to receive that regularly here; generally it is very supportive and encouraging; if people are confused, disappointed or whatever, perhaps they are less likely to speak to me. One interesting observation is that pre-Eltham, someone may have asked for a copy of the homily once in five to ten years; in the past (better) seven years here, it happens several times a year.

For a longer version the next copy of national priests' magazine SWAG will publish my article called *Preaching with a Punch*. A longer version again may appear in my book, hopefully out next year.

*As I conclude in those longer versions, to preach with a punch I find that it's important to be well prepared through our pastoral contact with people as well as giving time for research, prayer and reflection. It's crucial to be willing to share our personal faith experience with our people and using stories and other people's experiences holds their interest and can be a powerful vehicle for communicating the Good News. Just like life itself, preaching is an adventure, a challenge, a sacred and privileged responsibility.*

Father Kevin

## Library News

The Book of the Month for August is *Grace Notes* by Brian Doyle. Brian died from a brain tumour a short time ago. I used to look forward to his weekly Faith column in our newspapers some years back, and fell in love with his unique style of writing about everyday things in his clever, quirky way. I enjoyed his work so much I took myself into the Australian Catholic University a few years back, to meet him. I will always treasure that I did this. His death had quite an impact upon me, as his writing gave an insight to his beautiful soul. I immediately acquired this book for I felt I needed something of him in my life. Now I share it - and him - with you. You will know what I mean when you read these glimpses of his understanding

about human nature and all its foibles, always carried with humour. You will recognise so much of yourself in this book. He makes up words as he goes: Take *agogishment* for astonishment as an example. I think I will adopt it in memory of Brian.

The blurb on the book tells us that Brian Doyle is the most passionate Catholic Storyteller in America, and the author of this eclectic and compelling collection of short stories about discovering the incarnated Spirit of God: here are 37 short snapshots. Do yourself a favour and read it.

Trish Taylor



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## ***The woman at the well***

The story of Jesus' meeting with the Samaritan woman at the well, the subject of the gospel for the third Sunday of Lent, has always fascinated me for a number of reasons. This encounter between Jesus and the woman is the longest exchange Jesus has with an individual in all of the gospels. Jesus, in speaking to this woman, is behaving in an unorthodox manner according to first century AD Jewish society. Firstly, she is a woman. Secondly, she is a Samaritan. People from Samaria were regarded in a very poor light by the Jews. Samaritans were seen as very slack in terms of orthodoxy, which is partly borne out by the fact that this woman has had several "husbands," which we read as perhaps not legitimate husbands at all. In fact Jesus makes the point that the one she is currently living with is not a husband. Her morality is thus in question. So Jesus is speaking with a person who would normally be anathema to a strict Jewish male of the time on three counts: gender, race and morals.

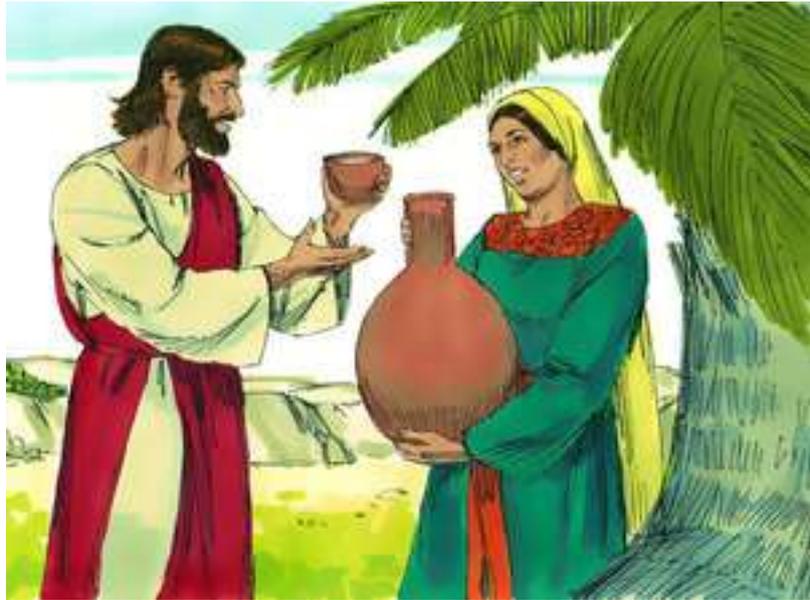
Yet, Jesus converses with her.

One point worth considering is the physical environment of this meeting. They meet at a well in the middle of a dry, dusty environment. Wells at this time and in this place were not the wells of our childhood memory of the Jack and Jill story – a nicely built structure of stone or brick, above the ground with a convenient winch affair to lower and raise the bucket. The well in this story is simply a hole in the ground with maybe some sort of stone cover over it. It has been interpreted by some theologians that Jesus was actually sitting on top of the well, the very place from where the woman needed to draw water. This has theological/Christological significance.

When Jesus refers to Himself as giving her water that would slake her thirst once and for all, it has added impact because He is literally taking the place of the physical well!

The well in question is referred to as Jacob's well, but there is no actual record in Genesis of such a well. Genesis does, however, mention Jacob's gift of land around Shechem to his son Joseph. It is in the Rabbinic literature that well traditions linked to Jacob can be found.

John's narrative seeks to emphasise the link between Jacob, the well giver, (the producer of miraculous flowing water, which is seen as God's gift to Israel, Jacob's descendants), with the gift of Jesus Himself as the living water. Jesus is the wellspring gift of God and the giver of future waters of eternal life. Jesus initiates the dialogue with the woman, using the imperative "Give me a drink". In order for her to give Him a drink Jesus would



have to move to give her access to the well. He was therefore challenging her to converse or to confront Him. Her response is one of surprise or even shock, a reply that Francis J. Moloney describes as "arrogant": "What? You are a Jew and you ask me, a Samaritan, for a drink?" The Greek word for "Jew" which is used here is, from the Samaritan perspective, an insulting term. So the woman's initial reaction to Jesus is hostile.

When Jesus says that if only she knew what God was offering her and who was speaking to her, she would have been the one to ask for a drink. He can give her living water, a term she naturally misunderstands. She replies "you have no bucket, sir". As a result of just those few words of Jesus and his reference to God and the living water, a change is wrought in the woman. This is seen in her addressing Him as "Sir". A big shift in the woman's attitude towards Jesus.

I suggest that her very logical, human, albeit literal, response to Jesus' words about giving her water, endears her to the reader. One can almost see the quizzical expression on her face as she responds to what she probably sees as a confusing declaration! She exhibits no embarrassment, no fear in facing Him. Perhaps she is used to confronting men, or dealing with them when they attempt to intimidate her. Whatever the reason, she stands her ground. She even goes so far as to question whether Jesus is greater than "our father Jacob who gave us this well." This questioning by the woman clearly confirms the dialogue that has been established between Jesus and her, as well as the fact that she has moved from hostility to a certain degree of confidence in her relationship with him.

This is most disconcerting, yet compelling. Here we have Jesus going out of His way, again, to engage with someone who is outside the Jewish society. The gospel tells us that Jesus reveals his knowledge of her and she interprets His knowledge as that of a prophet. She attests to a faith in the coming of a Messiah and understands that "he will tell us everything." Jesus reveals Himself to her as the Promised One. She forgets about getting the water and goes back immediately to her village. She tells her people "I wonder if this man is the Christ?" This is not the result of her own knowledge, but through the experience of her personal encounter with Jesus, which has changed her, and the revelation of the truth by God. She has been chosen to bear witness to Christ's mission on earth. In this respect, one can argue, she was

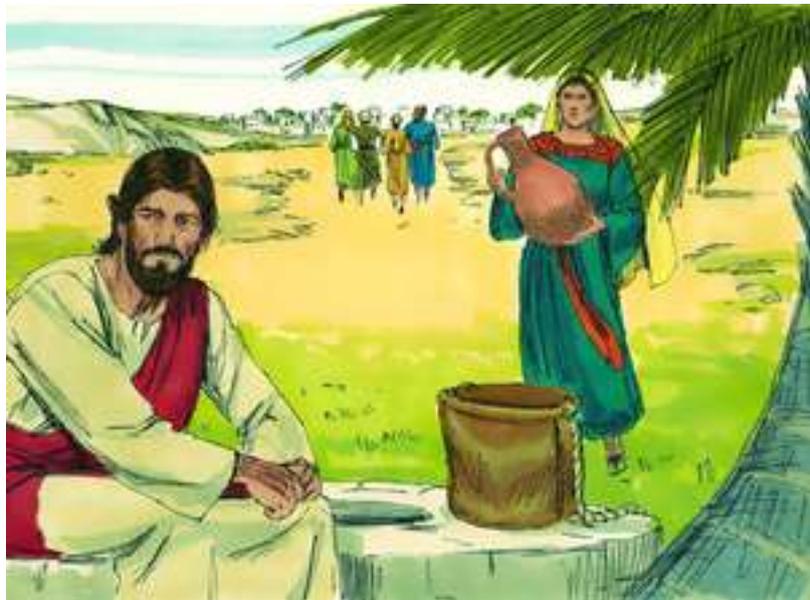
called to be a disciple of Jesus and to spread the good news which she has received first-hand. It is through her testimony that many of her town came to believe in Jesus. The others came to believe through their own encounter with Jesus, but that encounter was initiated by the woman.

This discipleship conferred on her by Jesus enables her to take the news back to her village with the consequence that the village was drawn to follow Jesus. Which brings us to another remarkable point about this story. When she returns to her village, her story is not ignored nor discounted. Does she perhaps have some level of credibility in her village that she is not written off as a nutter or someone just trying to gain notoriety? So, the question is why was she believed? Was it the strength of her sincerity in her wondering if she had encountered the Messiah? Was it a certain conviction that gave her an air of authority? Did her sincere belief shine through and give her the strength to exercise such authority? These are thoughts to reflect upon. What is certain is that her testimony and audacity bring about an enormous change in a whole group of people.

So what is fascinating about this story?

She responds to the man in front of her on a level other than cultural and situational. She

moves from hostility towards His person, to a readiness to listen to His words, to a belief in Him as the Christ. Jesus reveals His identity to her. She comes to a belief in Jesus, as a result takes action and returns to her people. She leaves without taking the water that she originally came to fetch. She carries back to her village not the water from Jacob's well, destined for the one group of people, to satisfy a physical need, but



the message of the Living Water, which will give eternal life, for the whole world. She initiates the response of her people to come and listen to the Word of God. She is not named and yet she is one of the most significant figures in the gospel narratives.

The Samaritan woman's story is situated in the narrative of the gospel which is demonstrating the developing levels of faith and the gradual revelation of Jesus' identity and his mission, well beyond Israel, to the whole world.

This particular woman in John's Gospel story I believe gives voice to women, but also speaks to all people, especially those outside the mainstream of society. It is with this woman that Jesus spends a great deal of time and energy in revealing the message, not only of John's gospel, but of the whole of Jesus' teaching. That message is that He is the Living Water, the Light of the world. John's gospel is about faith in God through the revelation of Jesus as His Son. The gospel explores the witness of people who come to a belief in Jesus through a personal encounter and through the revelation by God through Jesus' words.

Jesus' message is for the world. John's message is about the gift of faith. For John, the Evangelist, THE sin is the sin of lack of faith in Jesus. "Lamb of God, who takes away the SIN of the world, have mercy on us."

The Samaritan woman receives the gift of faith. She does not keep it to herself but spreads the message of that faith to her world. She is the exemplar par excellence of what we are all called to do. She looks for water, the necessity for life, and finds the Living Water, faith, the necessity for eternal life.

We are all that Samaritan woman. We have all been outcasts in some form or another in our lives, never so much perhaps as in today's post - Christian society, particularly in Australia. We are all challenged by Jesus to enter into dialogue with Him, to experience a personal encounter with Him, as witnessed by the many great mystics of our church, and to come to realise the "water" He is offering us. It is through our Lenten journey that we have been given the opportunity to reflect on our faith and what we are being called to do. The arrival, at the end of that journey, is the great Easter celebration of New Life, beautifully symbolised through the Easter Fire,

the Blessing of the Water and the Lighting of the Pascal Candle. The Easter Christ is the light (of faith) that shines in the darkness (the absence of faith): "I am the light of the world". In response to this gift of faith we are called, just as the Samaritan woman was called, to go out into the streets and take that light, to recognise and experience Christ alive in all we meet, to feel the air electric with His love.

KATHLEEN NOLAN