

Pentecost Vigil

(Ex 19:3-8.16-20 / Ez 37:1-14 / John 7: 37-39)

19.05.2018

At the heart of this night of Solemn Vigil, I would like to reflect with you upon something we can all experience in our lives at certain moments – and this can sometimes be for prolonged periods of our existence: I'm thinking of spiritual dryness... the sentiment that somehow we are far distant from the One whom we know to be the source of our lives.

The invitation we hear Jesus address to His listeners in the gospel passage just proclaimed acknowledges that this is where firmly committed believers can find themselves on occasion. We should note that it was to people who were gathered round him in the temple participating in the liturgical festival – that's to say, pious worshippers – that Jesus spoke His words of invitation: *If any one among you thirsts let that one come to me! Let that one come and drink who believes in me!*

Reading Jesus' words of invitation – to come to Him so that our thirst may be quenched – I am led to recall a passage of Scripture which expresses that deep, seemingly unfulfilled, longing of one suffering from spiritual dryness. The words of psalm 42 come to mind: *Like the deer that yearns for running streams, so my soul is thirsting for You, my God...* I won't quote any further here from the beautifully poetic Grail translation with which we are so familiar. Instead, this evening I will use Ed Petersen's rendering of the psalm found in his paraphrase *The Message*. Therein Peterson uses contemporary idiom to express the psalmist's thought. Here is how Peterson renders the psalmist's experience into very direct contemporary English:

I want to drink God,

deep draughts of God.

I'm thirsty for God-alive.

I wonder, 'Will I ever make it

– arrive and drink in God's presence?'

(Right now) I'm on a diet of tears

– tears for breakfast, tears for supper.

In whatever translation we read psalm 42 – in whatever idiom we render the psalmist's thought – what comes across is his malaise, his discomfort and even, let's dare to name it, his deep suffering.

The psalmist doesn't hide from God – nor does he hide from his readers – the level of pain he feels in the depths of his heart. He expresses how distressing he finds it to be unable to quench his thirst. He manifests that the spiritual dryness he is enduring leaves him feeling distraught. On the positive side, the healthy thing is that the psalmist knows he is thirsty; he is aware that he is dehydrated. The consequences of dehydration are worse – they can be fatal – when people are unaware of the fact that they are thirsting.

For me, what the psalmist expresses points to something we all need to hear at times. Namely, that we shouldn't be afraid to feel and/or to acknowledge the suffering we are experiencing in life.

Those tears we are all led to shed at times can be vital for our well-being. They can serve to release a tension within us which if it was not released somehow might otherwise lead us to crack and break down altogether.

Recalling how it was to those gathered around Him in the temple that Jesus spoke His words, inviting them to come and be comforted, relieved of their distressing thirst, we cannot but think of how the psalmist lived so much of his own life in the temple, engaged in worship there. And yet, very clearly, his proximity to God and participation in the liturgy did not safeguard him from the experience of deep pain and suffering, sorrow and distress which were part of his life.

The psalmist recounts how he reacted when people came along to pester him – apparently taunting him with their question: *‘Where is this God of yours?’* You want to be with Him, where is He? Why is He not with you?

I quote Peterson’s rendering of the text:

*These are the things I go over and over,
emptying out the pockets of my life.
I was always at the head of the worshipping crowd,
right out in front,
Leading them all,
eager to arrive and worship,
Shouting praises, singing thanksgiving –
celebrating God’s feast!*

The psalmist has heard others question him, he is not afraid to take their question on board; he now asks himself:

Why are you down in the dumps, dear soul?

Why are you crying the blues?

One gets the impression that he is about to go under – to sink into the depths of despair, but then suddenly his mood swings. He looks up and as he does so, it is as if his heart is lifted from that place of sorrow which had nearly overwhelmed him.

His words explain what saved him. He lifted his eyes to the Lord! He exclaims:

*Fix my eyes on God –
soon I’ll be praising again.*

The part the psalmist himself had to play on the way to healing in his life was to remember and give thanks for all the good things in his existence which he had seemingly forgotten. To remember the good things is something we all can do – something we should do – when the going is tough in our lives.

The psalmist shares his simple secret in the prayer he prayed to God and into which he gives us an insight. I quote from the psalm again:

*When my soul is in the dumps, I rehearse
everything I know of You.*

When we are feeling *bad in ourselves*, as we put it in colloquial speech – when we are *down in the dumps*, feeling weary and sad – there is nothing better for us than to recognise the goodness of God which is all around us... His goodness (and our own) which is also there deep down within us. How important it is for us to acknowledge that goodness in words, naming it for ourselves and even putting it into song as we proclaim God’s praises! Again and again, this is brought home to us throughout the Book of the Psalms and in so many other places in the Scriptures. It was when the apostle Paul was at his lowest ebb that he most sang God’s praises. So many of the great spiritual teachers make the same point in their writings and display its truth by their example. When things were at their worst in their lives they praised God with a song. Think of Francis of Assisi’s *Canticle of Creation*. He didn’t intone this song on a sunny day, but at a time of great suffering in his life!

I think it legitimate to think of those *fountains of living water* which Jesus speaks of as *flowing in the breast of the thirsty who come to Him* as equivalent to what the psalmist calls *the praise of our God*.

One of the great graces of the Pentecost event which we celebrate was to free the disciples from the locked in space wherein they had enclosed themselves.

They had taken refuge in the Upper Room in an unhealthy way. They had gone there wrapped in sadness; they had closed themselves into that place filled with fear.

The Upper Room was for them a place of evasion.

It was precisely there – in their place of evasion – that Jesus came to visit the Apostles; it was there that God's Holy Spirit was sent upon them. With the Spirit's coming they were led out of their self-imposed prison. The Spirit came as a cleansing fire. The Spirit freed the Apostles who were prisoners of themselves – captives of their own fear – so that they could go forth to boldly proclaim the Good News to the whole world.

We can only ever proclaim and make real for others what we ourselves have experienced as true for ourselves.

I firmly believe that if we are to proclaim to others and make real for them what is often referred to as *the new wine of the Spirit*, then, we need to undergo something akin to the transformation experienced by that woman of Samaria to whom Jesus revealed a thirst in herself that hitherto she didn't know she had – and certainly didn't know how to deal with.

Let me end this reflection by sharing with you how the poet Sansom encapsulates the experience of the woman of Samaria who is revealed to be the really thirsty one in the story recounted in John 4.

*He brought me home from my self-forced journey –
He showed me my own soul
Cracked and dry as discarded wine-skin,
And made it whole*

Such an experience of healing and restored wholeness can be ours this Pentecost. This is what God longs to see us enjoy. Let us ask Him to strengthen our own desire for the grace He offers us. Let us ask Him to help us to open our hearts with trust to receive it.

Like the woman of Samaria whose previously unrecognised, unacknowledged thirst was revealed to her by Jesus, may we be able to say, after having responded to the Lord's invitation addressed to us this evening – His invitation to come and receive from Him living water – what the poet has the Samaritan woman say:

*He came to me with His eyes and asked for water,
Stretched out His hands and spoke.
As I carried my peace back to the streets of Sychar,
A new world woke.*

The gift of the Spirit is given for a new world. May a new world awaken for each one of us on this holy night which heralds the dawn of the eternal day.