

## Reflection: Sunday February 24, 2008

### Sacred Heart Cathedral, Hamilton



Thank you, Bishop Michael, for your words of welcome and for your invitation to share this reflection. May I begin by explaining briefly what we Sisters are about today and why we are grateful to have our Convocation Ritual at this Mass:

- Every few years a religious congregation such as ours holds what we call a General Chapter when we elect new leadership and deal with issues that are important for us at the time.
- We Josephites are beginning a Chapter process today that will conclude with an assembly of Sisters in October. The intervening months are a time of prayer, reflection and discernment when we consider together the challenges that face us as we move into the future.
- Our congregation was founded at Lochinvar in September 1883 as a *diocesan* congregation. So for almost 125 years our life and mission have been very closely connected to that of this local Church of Maitland-Newcastle.
- We see our Chapter, then, is an ecclesial event, one that is significant not only for us but for the Church. So it is important for us that you all know that we are having our Chapter this year, and that we have your prayers and support during this time.

I found it quite providential that our gospel today was the story of the **Woman at the Well** because a couple of years ago there was an International Congress in Rome on Religious Life, and its theme, '*With Passion for Christ and Passion for Humanity*', was based on two gospel texts: the Woman at the Well and the Good Samaritan<sup>1</sup>. The Congress made the point that *all the baptised* are called to be seekers of the wells of living water and the roads of the half-dead – called, that is, to deepen our relationship with God and our response to the needy – but it is particularly incumbent on religious to do so because by our religious profession we make a public commitment of our lives to Jesus and his mission.

The Samaritan woman gradually came to recognise who Jesus really was and what he offered her: Living Water welling up to eternal life – what the second reading spoke about as '*grace poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit*'. The woman's conversion - her growth in faith - would not have happened without her personal encounter with Jesus. For all of us here in this Church, a deepening **personal relationship with Jesus** is central to all that we are and do as Christians and members of the Church. For us Sisters it is *that relationship alone* that gives meaning and purpose to our vocation as vowed religious, and to our various ministries.

Jesus' dialogue with the woman tells us something *also* about what he expects of his followers in our **relationships with others**. The woman was a Samaritan - marginalised, despised, excluded by the Jews - but Jesus, a Jewish man, engaged her in a very deep and

meaningful conversation. He met her enquiries, even her objections, with integrity and respect, he passed no moral judgments of disapproval or reproach. Would that all our relationships were characterised by such **inclusiveness, respect and acceptance of differences!**

As a consequence of her encounter with Jesus, the woman **became a missionary**, the first person in the gospels to bring a *group* of people to belief in Jesus. The reading seems to suggest that disciples found it quite disturbing not only that Jesus was talking in public to a woman, but also that he allowed her to exercise a missionary role which they considered to be theirs. The woman, for her part, after she led the villagers to Jesus, stood back and let them come to know him and believe in him on their own. It is worth reflecting on what all that might be saying to us about our role in his Church today.

Of course in our efforts to be all that we are called to be, there are often things that draw us away from the Living Water Jesus offers us – which brings me to my last point: the **symbolism of five husbands**. Scripture scholars tell us that when Jesus told the Samaritan woman that she had had *five husbands*, he was probably referring to the fact that the Samaritans, when they returned from exile in Assyria, brought with them the worship of five false gods.

We could ask ourselves what **false gods** prevent *us* from worshipping the Father in spirit and in truth? Are they, as someone has suggested<sup>2</sup>, things like

- the "*consumerist husband*" who creates in us an ever-growing need for more possessions and creature comforts, or
- the "*individualist husband*" who seduces us into insensitivity to the needs of anyone but ourselves, or
- the "*secularist husband*" who makes us hesitate in today's world even to talk about our faith, much less share it with others, or
- the "*thousand-things-to-do husband*" who leads us away from the well into activities that leave no time nor space for reflection and prayer?

The season of Lent is a time when we all are encouraged to reflect on these things.

Today's gospel, then, gives us *all* a lot to think about as we leave this church and return to our day-to-day lives, and it gives us Sisters a lot to think about as we begin our Chapter process.

We earnestly ask you all to pray for us, and with us, in the coming months that we will deepen and strengthen our relationship with Jesus, and our commitment to the mission of bringing His Good News to our world.

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<sup>1</sup> See <http://www.uisg.org/English/congress2004en2.htm>

<sup>2</sup> cf. Dolores Aleixandre RSCJ. Keynote address, 2004 Congress on Religious Life: "Seekers of Wells And Roads: Two Icons for a Samaritan Religious Life"