

03/19/17 3 Lent A

-- In 1219, while the 5th Crusade was going on, St. Francis of Assisi went to visit the Sultan of Egypt. It was a dangerous visit, given the climate between Catholics and Muslims of that time. He made the journey believing he would either convert the Sultan or die a martyr.

-- He went unarmed, in peace. And neither of those two things took place. He did not convert the Sultan, nor did the Sultan convert him to Islam, but they engaged in a dialogue. The Sultan offered him several gifts, but he took home only one: a horn used for the call to prayer.

-- This visit, which is depicted in a movie that will premiere in Toledo this afternoon, reminds me of the conversation of Jesus with the woman at the well. For that was a true dialogue as well.

-- This gospel is rich in meaning, and I could do several different homilies on it: about water and baptism, about evangelization, about a change of heart, etc. And there are important differences between this dialogue and the one between Francis and the Sultan.

-- But, in many ways, the similarities outweigh the differences. Jesus and the woman come from different religious backgrounds, but they worship the same God, though in different ways.

-- In both cases, they were taught not to associate with one another. But they gradually broke through those barriers. They established a real relationship through their conversation.

-- To do that, they had to take chances, to be vulnerable to each other. They had to defy social conventions to speak to each other and, more importantly, really listen to each other.

-- Of course, Jesus had more knowledge of the woman than she did of him. He knew her situation (how much was of her own doing and how much was beyond her control, we don't know) but that was not an obstacle to their conversation. He took her where she was.

-- He answered her questions and stuck with her, even when she tried to change the subject. And he surprised her. This is the first time in John's gospel when we hear him say *I Am*. He indeed was the one she and her people were looking for.

-- But she was only able to believe in him and tell others about him because he was willing, in the first place, to talk to her, to take her where she was. That is what true dialogue is all about.

-- This gospel is so important in our own day because so much religious talk is in the form of *I'm right...you're wrong*. Now, I'm not suggesting that truth is relative. But none of us has a perfect understanding of truth.

-- Dialogue means we respect the person we are talking to, however different he or she may be from us in background or beliefs. Dialogue also requires the willingness to change our point of view after listening to the other, even as we continue to hold to our core beliefs.

-- The woman at the well was changed through her dialogue with Jesus. She went back and witnessed to that to the people of her town. But, in a sense, Jesus was changed as well. He saw the faith of a woman from a very different background and, humanly speaking, it enriched his point of view.

-- In my own experience of dialogue with Muslims, I have been enriched. It has made me appreciate, not only their faith, but mine more deeply as well. The practices of regular prayer and fasting mean more to me, though I have to confess I'm not very good at the fasting part.

-- I'm convinced that our willingness to dialogue with those who share many things with us but differ in some beliefs will enrich our own faith. Other Catholics I know have had that experience. This gospel story seems to confirm that fact.

-- And, if nothing else, we will have a more peaceful world. St. Francis helped that cause, if only in a small way. We can all do the same.