

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

Thirst

In the early days of the Church Lent was invented for those awaiting Easter Baptism. They went into a final intensive way of preparation which included a tough fasting régime, intensive prayer, and, in the Liturgy, a series of exorcisms (surrendering the various features of the pagan way of life which could not coexist with Christianity - and there were plenty!) and the landmark moments of acceptance: the gift of the Creed, the gift of the Lord's Prayer. On this third Sunday of Lent the catechumens would undergo the first of three appraisals, shared examinations of their stage of conversion to Christ; and the Liturgy marks this with the choice of three great Gospel readings. These moments of testing were called "scrutinies".

"Let Us Come With You!"

The rest of the Church, the already-baptised, did not long stand by watching the Lenten discipline of the new converts. They wanted to share the experience with them; and so Lent became a great communal exercise in prayer, generosity, and sacrifice. Today we re-read the ancient texts chosen for the first scrutiny, particularly the story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman at Jacob's Well. They meet in the heat of noon at a well, founded by and named for their common ancestor, whose surname was *Israel*. The woman is there because she and her live-in partner are thirsty; she has to slog down several times a day with a heavy bucket and a long rope, and heave the even heavier water back up the hill. It is one of her most frequent errands, and one of the hardest; but it is also the most essential. (O plumbed-in British Christian, don't fail to notice how unconscious we are of this work, which still burdens vast numbers of women in this 21st century. Give to Family Fast Day!) But notice also that the woman has brought the gear to get the water up; the well is deep, and Jesus is helpless. So he asks her for a drink.

Sharing Needs As Well As Gifts

At once there is community between them: at the level symbolised by the deep water of Jacob's Well, human beings share the same need. At first she sounds sardonic; *Am I fit to offer a drink to an actual Jew?* Then Jesus quietly says that he has unknown gifts to offer to her. What is in their minds during this exchange? The Gospel tells us clearly;

we can identify with the woman of Samaria. They meet at the well of their patriarch.

She

She is filled with weariness. She is tired of her awful life: she has run through five failed marriages, five authoritative verdicts of rejection; she has now abandoned the whole concept: she almost certainly thinks herself to be unmarriageable. She is weary of being a Samaritan, living with half a religion - that is, with no religion. And she is weary of the most basic daily toil, this endless drawing of water, for needs that are never satisfied.

He

In Jesus' mind there is the eternal divine goodwill towards a homeless, hopeless woman separated over and over again from her heart's desire: perhaps her desperate need for the next new relationship has never allowed her to grieve for the last one. Now broken with disappointment, enslaved to the hard work of her life, her buried grief is quite legible to Jesus. The Preface of the Mass tells us his mind: *When he asked her for a drink, he had already prepared for her the gift of faith. In his thirst to receive her faith, he awakened in her heart the fire of your love.*

Thirst, Faith, Fire of Love

There are the elemental ingredients of this Lenten scrutiny. Thirst is part of fasting: we Northerners, in our wet world, hardly ever feel it. We quench a kind of ghost of thirst, having little idea of the thirst of desert places on the cusp between life and death, or of the sweet poetry of water, which slakes and gives life and cleanses the aridity of dust and sand. Lent invites us to go down into the depths of our own thirst, to see how our life hangs by this silver thread of water; how contingent, how passible we are in our need! That place of poverty is the birthplace of our fear and anxiety, our selfishness and criminality, meanness and enslavement. Jesus meets us there. He cannot do this without us (we have the only bucket!) but if we are prepared to listen, and to speak to him at the well-head, we shall discover that he already knows our career, with all its mistakes and failures (*he told me all I have ever done*); and we shall discover the gift of faith, a fire of love deeper than the fire of thirst which brings us to this Lenten meeting. *Fr Philip*