

# THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

## The Well Of Jacob

Samaritans are not Jews. They represent the remnants of ten tribes of Israel, who separated from Jerusalem in a great schism after the death of Solomon. At that moment they lost a great deal: they parted with the Throne of David and his heir (who had every intention of taxing them within an inch of starvation); they lost the Temple, and the Ark of the Covenant which remained in it. They also lost their brothers of the tribe of Judah, and that of Benjamin. Their history muddled along for some time, but at last they were overwhelmed by the Assyrians, who exiled them and dispersed them, and they disappeared into the soup of peoples known as the Babylonian empire. They were never to be seen again; but a mixed-race remnant of these former Jews reappeared to the north of Judaea, and south of Galilee: because they were so near to the Judaeans, who survived the Exile practically intact, they were given no respect: they were contaminated, “black sheep”, adulterated in race and in religion.

### The Woman of Samaria

So the woman Jesus meets has always known she is a half-caste, half-gentile who can expect short shrift from a Jew; further, her personal history is such that she may not even have had great respect from other Samaritans. In the common phrase, her pitcher has been to the well too often, and like so many of us, she is beginning to tire of the whole game. There is a lovely poem of Herbert's, called *The Pulley*, which describes God giving Man all the gifts he can, until only one is left: the gift of rest. This God withholds, saying: *Let him be rich and weary, that at least, If goodness lead him not, yet weariness May toss him to my breast.*

### The Wisdom Of Desire

The meeting in the Gospel is at noon; the sense of thirst is very clear. Water is very heavy, and thirst is therefore a wearying reality. From this beginning the encounter unfolds, with Jesus asking for water. The woman demurs, drawing his attention (humbly, without any falsity) to her low status in the eyes of any Jew. But Jesus has no use for this. She is in his sights, and he has decided to meet her, not at the superficial level where there is water to be drawn and weary work to be done, but in the depths of her thirst for life, which has so regularly been disappointed; her five failed marriages have been succeeded by a plain co-

habitation, as if she has ceased to hope for anything more dignified.

### Christ's Welcome

*Jesus finds her ready for the Gospel.* His disciples, and certainly the Pharisees, wouldn't understand this; they could only have seen a foreign woman, and would on two counts never have spoken to her at all. Jesus' ability to reach across barriers is part of the wonder of him; coupled with a holiness people could see, hear, and touch, this sheer *freedom* from human limitation was like a communicable disease in him. I'm sure it was the quality that detached the fishermen from their boats so effortlessly. It was no irresponsibility, no irreverence, and it enabled him to say: *the Son of Man is master even of the Sabbath*, and instead of abusing him for impiety, people stopped in their tracks and thought about it. What Jesus senses in this woman is the huge capacity of her desire. Whatever evil she has suffered, she has never come to say: *I've had enough.* Would you count that a virtue, or a vice? For Jesus, clearly it is virtue. *Not just water*, he says, *but living water, welling up in you to eternal life!* This is no-holds-barred language between a Jewish rabbi and someone he well knows to be “a loose woman”. When you think of the pursed lips and wary, monosyllabic response most of Jesus' representatives would accord her even today, he becomes more and more astounding. It is in her deep, irresolvable *desire* that he finds entrance; and she is led to acknowledge him to her townfolk as one who knows her perfectly, and who might be the Messiah. This startling burst of missionary activity amongst Samaritans is unique in any Gospel. Perhaps this story should shock us out of our pious, churchy respectability, and send us out to the pagan world we live in, where, despite its easy morals, its lack of prayer, and its lack of Church, the thirst for life still cries out loudly to God, and where Jesus, the Son of God, greets it with generosity and joy, and answers it. *Fr Philip*