

One of the first things a mother looks for in a new baby is thirstiness. It's as much a challenge if the baby isn't a sucker as if the baby arrived infected with some terrible disease. As it went, I am delighted to say that I came equipped with a colossal thirst, and that I have been blessed in the slaking it ever since.

It would always have been true that thirst would be a shorthand for desire; and desire too is something that proceeds from our very nature; it is also something that can stand for our highest ideal. Augustine knew that desire can range from the most basic animal need, up to the mystical longing for God which nothing but God can quieten. He would see the desire of the flesh for the Spirit as the principle of salvation already at work in us. The flesh and the spirit find their wedding in Jesus, the incarnate Word. That is why Augustine spoke of the womb of the Virgin Mary as a marriage-bed.

The meeting at Jacob's well is thus a thoroughly enfleshed one. A man meets a woman, a Jew meets a Samaritan, the Saviour of humanity meets a lost soul. This woman appears to us as one in whom desire has run a disastrous course; she has been rejected from five marriages, and has now settled for a cohabitation whose meaning is minimal. But the daughter of Eve and the Son of God meet together at the well of the patriarch, their common ancestor: because both are children of Eve, and both are thirsty. Jesus speaks to her and establishes their community of need: *Give me a drink*. And from that basic human community, their talk leads them down, as the Son of God is travelling downwards, into the dark spaces beneath the pitiless noon, into the depths where the water is. To her wonderment, she finds herself listening to the story of her endless search for peace, and to a lyrical promise of a secret spring opened within her desiccated life, that will spring up to everlasting life: not transient water that is endless labour and burden, but true, living water, that fulfils the thirst of a whole life. She is suddenly awoken from the exhaustion of her disappointment, and shows a sign of hope: *Sir, give me that water, that I may never thirst again and never have to come here to search for it*.

This encounter has become something immensely deep, because Jesus has no way of meeting us that is trivial; he meets us, and he welcomes us in our whole reality, and he is available to us in his whole reality. That is how he came to capture people so dramatically. He is incarnate divine love, and therefore his meetings with people are miraculous ones. Last weekend in this place we saw the return of a host of people who had a similar experience in this University. The possibility of this miraculous encounter is the endless hope of the Church wherever it is to be found. Their coming to revisit the scene was much more than a chance to see old friends; indeed, many of them had been here at different times, and had never met each other at all. They came to Mass, because it was in their drawing close to each other that they had drawn close to Christ. They made a lot of lovely music, because their lives were harmonised by their belonging together to Christ. They knew him again in the breaking of the bread, and many of them have written back to say how deeply they valued the experience.

The Catholic Chaplaincy I would like all of the people who belong to this community to spend time today thinking the same. It has always been a great privilege to me to have belonged to this place and this community. I humbly value some of the relationships God made for me here as the highest honour of my life. I am deeply concerned that we should continue to sustain this community for the future, serving it and giving to it all that we can, so that future generations can know the same welcome and love which so moved the people who returned last week, many of them from afar, some from the other side of the world. And this is not just a spiritual matter. It is a matter of that wedding between spirit and flesh. It is a matter of a physical meeting, and acts of bodily kindness motivated by the highest ideals. An onlooker may think that the quiet procession of people through the chaplaincy offices every day is just a crowd of students looking for an easy way to waste time, or find a free cup of coffee, or a place to sit and be welcomed. The woman at Jacob's well had little idea that her life was about to change. But the reason why there is a chaplain, and an office, and the coffee-

machine of the Patriarchs, is to do with the highest ideals of the University and of the Church. When a guest comes, Christ comes, and with him the possibility of miracles. I think of the Chaplaincy as a fountain of faith, hope, and love: the three things that bring people to God. The privilege of being the welcoming face and voice is the holiest of gifts. We need someone to step into the shoes of a growing tradition, formed of some of the kindest and most loving people I have ever known. We should not be anxious about filling this rôle. I would like to see you competing, struggling for this privilege.

The Catholic Society is a way of embodying the Church in the Union and the University student community. There is a need for its tasks to be shouldered for another year, and next year's committee needs to be formed. The tasks aren't arduous, the fun can be intense, but the gifts to be given to many, especially the ones who will be arriving in October whom we don't yet know, are beautiful and limitless in their meaning. All that's needed is that you should want the best for the community, in Christ's name.

Please be generous, creative, and selfless in providing what the Society needs.

The woman at the well came with nothing but her burdens, and with no self-respect. She left as a missionary, charged with good news for her neighbours, and what she said of the One she had met gathered them and brought them to Christ. Let this mystery be reborn in our lives, this Lent.