

The Third Meeting of the Lent Course 2005

The Third Sunday of Lent

In the First Sunday's readings we saw Jesus in the Desert, and meditated a little on the first Temptation, that of hunger. We saw then that Matthew presented Jesus' endurance of hunger as a symbol of his submission to the Spirit who was leading him to so hungry a place, as God had "made his people feel hunger" in their wandering through the Exodus desert.

But we remembered three modifications of this Lenten hunger:

- the Markan tradition of the ministry (diakonia) of the angels: *the angels ministered to him* (Matthew brings them in at the end, like the Seventh Cavalry)
- this gave us an echo of the Exodus, where God made his people eat bread from heaven, manna which came to be called *bread of angels*
- Jesus speaks of our not living only by bread, but on the Word from the mouth of God.

Jesus' acceptance of hunger is not a meaningless test, something to make him into an iron man with perfect control over his impulses. This Lenten hunger is something that has a divine purpose: it is an entry into deeper and deeper realms of *desire*, where the motives of the heart can be found and tested. Hunger like ours, habitually quietened through instant satisfaction by the contents of the fridge, cannot lead us to these depths. This is the reason why the Scripture gives us a forty-day fast, at the end of which Jesus' hunger is deep and intense, and the Church invites us to imitate him at our own pace.

On the Third Sunday the theme moves slightly aside, from hunger to thirst. Thirst is a still more urgent demand than hunger: we can live quite a long time without food, but without water we quickly die. There is a further dimension for us: in Lent we are journeying towards the renewal of our Baptism, as this poetry of thirst has been recruited into the Lenten recipe. It would be too much to say that the story of the Samaritan woman is a story about Baptism. But for the Church its presence in Lent is a staging-post between conversion of belief to conversion of life, and the renewal of Baptism.

Because Jesus was born into the violent heat and dryness of a land surrounded by desert, his people had a long tradition in poetry and writing about thirst and about the joy of fresh water. We should acknowledge that our wealth leads us to complacent ignorance of the meaning of these things. People in our situation take abundant clean water absolutely for granted, and that means we use it thoughtlessly and - much worse - without emotion many times a day. This will make it hard for us to think and feel what the Scriptures offer us in this Liturgy.

The Moral Dimension in the Bible

The Bible does not have compartments for separating religion or morality away from facts and stories. We have newspapers which, allegedly, can report facts and happenings without moral judgment. This illusion is more usually shattered than preserved, as the tabloids project popular morality onto the big screen, clamorously denouncing public sinners and demons: but our whole public life is run as if judgments about religion and sin are entirely irrelevant considerations. The Bible does not suffer from this curious convention. A human being in the Bible is a far more integrated reality. So our incident - "Jesus meeting a Samaritan woman at a well" - will not stop at describing surface reality or historical fact. It will be, by any of our categories, an encounter at a very deep level. Because the author of the Fourth Gospel is a very skilful writer, there is a powerful, silent symbol of this depth: *the dark mass of water that rests deep below the ground and out of sight*.

This is no ordinary water; this is the well of the Patriarch - Jacob, surnamed Israel. Despite the ancient feud between Samaritan and Jew, Jacob is the forefather of *both* the figures who meet at the hottest part of the day. Jesus is sitting there alone, and she arrives, bearing, as we shall shortly learn, rope and

bucket. We have a saying about *a pitcher that has gone once too often to the well*: it's proverbial in most European languages. It means a dodge that has been tried too often, and has utterly failed. This woman could say it of herself; she has a history, and no doubt it expresses itself in her gait and posture as she carries the irksome burden for the drawing of water down the hill, only to be forced into even harder labour as she carries it back up again with its heavy load. Water always lies low, and is very heavy; the well is deep, so the rope must be long. This is hard labour, and it happens more than once a day, and we would lose the spirit of Lent if we did not dwell on this fact for a moment.

The two who meet at the well are already charged with tremendous meanings. Let us count some of them, starting with the most obvious.

- Two thirsty people at a hot time of day at the head of a well.
- A Jewish man and a Samaritan woman at the well of their last common ancestor
- A Jewish man *with a thirst*, a Samaritan woman *with a rope and a bucket*.

When people meet Jesus in the Fourth Gospel the course of the conversation follows a typical pattern: it begins with relatively trivial remarks, and proceeds, often very quickly, to greater and greater depths. So we examine the dialogue closely. The first words, from Jesus, are three: *Give me to drink*. The woman replies with a certain mincing scorn. Family feuds usually come to dominate the combatants, to the point where they define their whole lives by opposition to their adversary: look at Ulster's "Christianity"! So this Samaritan: *Fancy a Jew asking a Samaritan woman for a drink! Fancy a Jew being so poorly-off that he can't keep up our ancient feud!*

Jesus then produces a paradox which deepens the intrigue. He issues a double challenge:

- if you knew who was speaking to you
- you would be the one to ask, and he would have given you living water

The precise meaning of *living water* has been a great focus of debate. It implies a contrast between the still water of a well or cistern, *phrear*, and the flowing water of a spring or fountain, *pege*; the usages are a little confused in our passage, but Jesus promises a *pege*.

Typically, the woman then responds on a simple, practical level: *Where's your bucket?* Then she gives a magnificent example of Johannine Irony: *the well is deep, and perhaps you are greater than Jacob our father?* The irony is that we already think of Jesus as the Word of God, infinitely greater than Jacob.

Jesus replies by speaking in a lyrical passage about a water that will slake all thirst, indeed, that will be opened as a living fountain within, leaping up to eternal life.

At this the woman is suddenly captivated, and she responds by fulfilling part two of the challenge: *she asks Jesus for water*. You can almost hear the yearning note in her little speech, expressing all the weariness, not only of her constant errands for water, but of her failed relationships, the homelessness of her life.

Now the other part of the challenge remains unfulfilled: she still *does not know who is speaking to her*, and her aspirations are still on the level of the world.

Jesus responds by raising precisely the issue of her personal life and her disastrous relationships. There is a little bit of strange history here which might be relevant, and it is about the Samaritans and their religion. When they broke off from Rehoboam, the son of Solomon, the northern Jews refused to go to worship in the Jerusalem Temple (which, Jeroboam knew, would soon have rebuilt their allegiance to the House of David). So he built them a new Temple on Mt Gerizim, near to the capital, Samaria. This had laid them open to the charge that they worshipped *other gods* (thus breaking the First Commandment).

When Samaria fell in 722 the nation was dissolved into Assyria, and the land repopulated with Gentiles, thus ensuring that their Jewish faith would be watered down beyond recognition. This was the official policy and it worked. The result of the consequent interbreeding was the Samaritans. One of the Canaanite gods was called Ba'al, which means both *Lord* and *husband*. So when Jesus tells the woman she has had five *ba'als*, and the one she now has is not her *ba'al*, he could easily mean that as a representative of the Samaritans, her religion is a mess.

On the other hand, it may be that Jesus is still addressing a real woman who happens to have been married five times and now has what we would call a *partner*. Because at the worst Jews were only allowed to marry three times, her life seems to be spectacularly immoral. It is a moment of judgment.

The previous chapter of John describes Nicodemus, the Pharisee, coming to Jesus by night. In their dialogue comes the following passage:

God loved the world so much that he gave the only Son, that everyone who believes in him may not perish, but may have eternal life. For God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe has already been condemned for refusing to believe in the name of God's only Son. Now the judgment is this: the light has come into the world, but men have preferred darkness to light because their deeds were evil. For everyone who practices wickedness hates the light and does not come near the light for fear his deeds will be exposed. But whoever acts in truth comes into the light, so that it may be shown that his deeds are done in God.

Will this woman be one who shuns the light for fear, or one who turns to the light for redemption? At first she tries to fend off the light with ambiguity: *I have no husband*. Jesus uses this evasion against her, uncovering her deeds: *he told me all I have ever done*. This opens the way for Jesus to tell her that true worshippers must worship the Father in spirit and truth: only by the Spirit does the Father beget true worshippers. At this the woman plunges into the depth of faith: *I know that there is a Messiah coming, who will announce all things to us*. This takes her experience (*he told me everything I have ever done*) to the religious plane: and Jesus says: *I who am speaking to you, I AM HE*.

Aficionados of these little courses will recognise in these words (the Greek *ego eimi*) the name of God announced to Moses. Now the other condition of Jesus' challenge is fulfilled: insofar as she is able, *she knows who it is that is speaking to her*.

The rest of the Gospel today speaks of the true corollary of Christian conversion: it is essentially missionary. The woman goes to the town ("leaving her pitcher" - she has gone past that kind of thirst, and is now herself a dispenser of the living water she has found in Jesus) and becomes an evangelist to her neighbours, who return with her and experience for themselves the One she has found.