

The Gospel for the Third Sunday of Lent

John 4: 4-42

Where are we in Lent? This Sunday's liturgy is the first of the three "masses of scrutiny" in the catechetical process (as expressed in the modern *Rite for the Christian Initiation of Adults*), and the liturgical reading of the three passages from John which form our next three Sunday Gospels stresses the theme of the catechumen's coming to Christ.

Today the rôle of **the catechumen** is taken by an unlikely candidate: a woman of unpromising ancestry (a Samaritan) and disastrous moral history (five times divorced, and now living in adultery). She is brought to Jesus, not by any religious impulse, but simply because Jesus is waiting at the local well.

However, all is not as it seems. On the first Sunday of Lent we saw **Jesus in the wilderness** offered three options for understanding himself and his world. He rejected them all in turn, in the name of an understanding given by God. His rejection of the temptations made room for the possibility of the divine meaning.

Last Sunday we contemplated a **transfiguration**, where one sort of understanding of Jesus suddenly found itself transcended by the glory of the Son of God; and the religious landscape of the disciples, dominated until now by the august figures of the Law (Moses) and the Prophets (Elijah) is transcended by their realisation of the truth about Jesus.

Now the simple **search for water** on a hot day becomes, in the presence of Jesus, the moment of Messianic revelation in the life of one woman: and, through her, the life of a whole town.

1 The characteristic method of John's Gospel is to start at the level of superficial conversation about ordinary matters, and by digging down into their real meaning, to enter into religious depths. The depths are already there in all of us, though we are too frightened to enter into them, dark and unexplored as they are. Jesus sometimes comes down into them to find those who are trapped or even buried there (the paralysed, the possessed, even the dead). Sometimes he meets those who are trapped on the surface of their lives, and encourages them to descend with him into the reality they dare not face. Today's story is of the second sort. The masterly choice of **the Well of Jacob** as the setting is now clear. Both the woman and Jesus need water. Despite the distance between them, Jacob, surnamed *Israel*, is their common ancestor. The God of Israel is, despite the confusion of Samaritan religion with idolatry, their one God. They meet at their shared roots, the source of their life.

2 John 3 describes a nocturnal visit to Jesus (*the Light shines in the darkness, and the darkness could not overpower it*) of **Nicodemus the Pharisee**. Darkness is shorthand for unbeing, for death, for sin, and for ignorance. Jesus uses this encounter to speak about light (Jn 3: 16-21):

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.

The language is that of *judgment* (many scholars think that the whole of John's Gospel is set as the trial of the Word of God before the tribunal of the world. In the end, it will be the Prisoner at the Bar who sits in judgment on the Prosecution).

3 **The search for water** is a commonplace for life in the Middle East: soon it may become so for all the world, as we deplete the resources of our planet to danger-level for all of us. Jesus speaks to this hot, hard-pressed woman in the hottest part of the day. In his eyes she displays a weariness not accounted-for even in such adverse conditions. Perhaps she is Eve, who was condemned to hardship and pain at the beginning. He has read her heart. He asks her for a drink, but soon reveals to her that he has a gift for her deeper and more life-giving than the daily water she is condemned to seek. He issues a double challenge:

- i that she should find out who he is and
- ii that she should ask him for water

After her initial sarcasm and superficiality, she reveals a heart full of weariness and longing; and she **asks Jesus for water**. To this Jesus adds his knowledge of her past. But his aim is not to torment her with guilt, but to lay bare the true depths at which she thirsts for life. She acknowledges him as *a prophet*.

4 She pays a fleeting visit to their divided religious heritages and places for worship. But Jesus will have no such talk. He speaks of a religious place *neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem*, from which they can both call on God together: **God begets his worshippers, by Spirit, in truth**. The woman suddenly feels that she has met someone more than a passing Jew, more than a prophet. She tentatively mentions a faith which must have been dragged from her ancestral past: ***I know there is a Messiah to come, who will tell us all things***. But - irony - Jesus has already *told her all she has ever done*. There is the opening for Jesus to reveal himself. *I who am speaking to you, I AM HE*.

You may recognise in these words (Gk *ego eimi*) the Name of God revealed to Moses at the burning bush (Ex 3). In this moment of revelation, **she has found out who he is**.

5 As if to drive home the possibility of any ordinary reality to become revelatory, transcended, there follows the entry of the disciples who have been to the supermarket. Jesus tells them he has food to eat they do not know about (remember our first Gospel, *we do not live by bread alone, but on every Word that comes from the mouth of God*). Then he describes to them in lofty terms what's been happening whilst they have been away on their errands. In the past the Bible has often spoken of the disappointed sower, who doesn't live to see the fruit of his labour, or who has his crops robbed by an enemy. But there is also the language of Deuteronomy about the Promised Land: God gives into our hands vines and orchards we have not planted, farms we did not sow, livestock we did not raise, cities we did not build. Here Jesus speaks of fields white for harvest: cf Matthew 9: 37: *The harvest is rich but the labourers are few: so ask the Lord of the harvest to send labourers to his harvest*.

6 The dubious moral background of the woman in this story is of vital importance to us as Christian evangelists: Jesus came to call sinners. It is a theme which we must take to heart in the world we face, which seems unpropitious for evangelisation. This Samaritan woman is by our standards a poor candidate for religious recruiting. Jesus evidently sees her quite differently: she has about her *weariness*, and *thirst*, in which he is able to discern the seedbed for *repentance*, and *desire*, if only she can be brought to the point of hearing the promise of God. Because she has received the word in such rich soil, she can become an evangelist herself, and bring her townspeople to Jesus through her own heartfelt testimony. Then their faith becomes founded, not on her word, but on that of Jesus, which is that of God. Therefore we can see the living water which Jesus promises as *his teaching* ("O all you who thirst, come to the water", Is 55: 3) and as *the Holy Spirit*, who alone brings people to true worship (cf "Jesus stood and cried out: *Let anyone who is thirsty come to me! Let anyone who believes come to me and drink! As Scripture says, from his heart shall flow streams of living water!* He was speaking of the Spirit which those who believed in him were to receive; for there was no Spirit as yet, because Jesus had not yet been glorified", Jn 7: 37-39).