

## The Third Sunday of Lent

Scattered around our Mass congregations this weekend are those men and women who are preparing with our support and prayer to become Catholics at Easter, either through Baptism or reception into the full communion of the Catholic Church. Each of them would be able to tell us the story of how the Lord has called them and guided them to this point in their lives. Often through a variety of experiences and relationships which have almost inexplicably brought them to a deepening relationship with Jesus Christ and his body the Church.

Of course it is not just our catechumens and candidates that experience this call or movement deep within us leading us to a deeper relationship with God. It is true for us and it is true for every human being even though every human being may not be conscious of it by experiencing explicit faith in God. I say this with conviction because I believe that the make up of every person is designed to lead them to God through the whole of their lives.

The woman at the well is the example given to us today. She is not given a name because she stands for us all and yet, while being nameless, she is a clear and well defined character whom any of us could meet. In the Samaritan town of Sychar everyone would have known her for the ease with which she found new husbands and for her gentle cheekiness and peppery sense of humour – ‘you have no bucket sir and the well is deep; how could you get this living water.’

All the Samaritan women would have known as well that no Jewish man would speak to them, that is why our own Samaritan woman would have found Jesus so strange. Samaritans were hated by the Jews because of centuries of political, economic, ethnic and religious conflict. Jewish travellers would avoid travelling through Samaria and anyway, Jewish men would not speak to women in public whoever they were because women were second class citizens.

And so the woman, in her surprise says, ‘What? You are a Jew and you ask me, a Samaritan, for a drink?’ – It was something unheard of. We can presume that she did give him a drink of water and that this provided the opportunity for Jesus to take the conversation further. ‘If only you knew what God is offering.... You would have been the one to ask and he would have given you living water.’ The woman fails to understand what he is talking about and thinks he means a kind of water that would stop her having to come to the well several times a day. More important than this peculiar idea of living water for the woman is the fact that Jesus draws her out on her five husbands and the fact that the man she has now is not her husband. Because of this the woman changes from her opening comments to Jesus which bordered on the uncivil to calling him a prophet and then wondering about whether he could be the Messiah. Notice what happens. How through an ordinary day to day event she grows in her relationship with, and her understanding of, Jesus. This is a key moment in her life when God steps into her experience and invites her closer to him.

Fascinated by the patient and unconventional Jewish man who was able to tell her everything she ever did, the woman had not yet understood or appreciated why Jesus was so attractive and strange. It was of course because of this gift which he was offering and which he described as 'living water'.

Jesus engaged the woman at the deepest level and at the heart of her concerns and fears: 'he told me everything I ever did'. She connected with him and began to grow in her understanding and appreciation of who he was and the difference he made.

We are here today because the experience of the woman is ours as well. In each of our lives there will be concerns and anxieties that eat away at us in one way or another. For the woman it was the number of men she had had in her life but for the rest of us the concern may be different. Whatever it is, whatever upsets our equilibrium or is our major concern Jesus is there in the middle of it. This is at the heart of our hope in God and our hope, as Paul says, 'is not deceptive, because the love of God has been poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit which has been given to us.'

The hope, the gift of the Holy Spirit, the love of God which has been poured into us is, what Jesus describes as, 'living water'. Not, as the woman wonders, that this water would prevent her having to make her way up to the well everyday, but that this water is the real gift poured into us which is our creator's way of perfecting and completing our lives. Within each of us there is a set of desires and drives which form our basic equipment for living. The desire for food and drink, for comfort and warmth, for knowledge and truth, for love and relationship; they take many different forms. I like to think that the Samaritan woman eventually came to realise that her desire for water and for love, and everything else come to that, were given her to lead her to Jesus and to the satisfaction and fulfilment that only he can give. The five men who had been part of her life and who had sustained her were just glimpses of the love and sustenance she was being offered in Jesus. 'If only you knew what God is offering and who it is that is saying to you: Give me a drink.'

Our presence here today means that we do know what God is offering and who it is that is making the offer. He is offering us living water because he is giving us his risen life to eat and drink.

In prayer, in hope, in faith and in love let us keep before us always the lesson of the message of the Samaritan woman that Jesus is the only way to life and all we need do is accept it. Surrounded by a world full of opportunity and prosperity, of comfort and wealth where the world of advertising deceives us into thinking that it can offer us a better future let us never forget the words of St. Paul today 'it is by faith and through Jesus that we have entered this state of grace in which we can boast about looking forward to God's glory' which, in the words of the great Saint Irenaeus, is our coming to the fullness of life.

