

Homily (notes) from Canon Philip Dyson

12th March 2023 - 3rd Sunday of Lent

Readings (Year A): 1st: Exodus 17:3-7. 2nd: Romans 5:1-2,5-8. **Gospel:** John 4:5-42

That text is the longest conversation Jesus has with anyone in all four gospels. This and the next two Sunday's gospels are about people coming to faith in Jesus, as he reveals himself to them.

Every story in John's gospel is an invitation to believe.

The woman at the well moves from the shock of this man, Jesus just talking to her, to her becoming a missionary to her people.

Lent among other things always has a baptismal note. The water of baptism is vital in our growth in faith. Water is the means, but the Holy Spirit flowing into us is the reality.

The 'living water' of which Jesus speaks brings to her not only awareness of her sins, but also forgiveness, hope in the person of Jesus as the Messiah and faith in his words.

Jesus rests his weary self at the well of Jacob in Samaria. Like his first sign in John's gospel at Cana, he meets around water; this time a well. Water we know vital for all life.

The location of a well would have reminded Christian / Jewish readers that their founding ancestors often met their brides at a well. Isaac met Rebecca; Jacob met Rachel. Moses and Zipporah were promised to one another at a well. Because the well provided water in a desert country, it was taken to symbolise the gift of life from God to his people.

Jesus meets a woman from a despised minority group, Samaritans. In this dialogue Jesus offers the gift of life to the most unlikely person. Jews and Samaritan's didn't mix. This was because Samaritans were survivors of the ten Northern tribes who broke with the Southern tribes of Judah & Benjamin and then were subsequently conquered and exiled by the Assyrians who planted that land with **five** pagan tribes each with their own gods.

The woman represents her race. Her **five** marriages and her present relationship did not merit the name of marriage. The number of men is six, an incomplete number by Jewish reckoning. Her encounter with Jesus brings the number to seven, the perfect and complete number.

Jesus is thirsty. He who is God thirsts for the creation he has made. It is midday, the sixth hour: the intense heat of the sun at noon in the Middle East. The sixth hour resonance to Jesus on the cross 'and from the sixth hour until the ninth hour there was darkness over all the land and Jesus said 'I thirst.'

The woman is alone. Unusual because women usually gathered at the well to exchange greetings and gossip. It is likely she was held in disdain by the other women in the town and possibly by all townsfolk, so she comes alone. She is taken aback when Jesus asks for a drink.

Jesus has come to transcend the divisions and prejudices of history. The conversation is like a stream as they engage in question and answer. Jesus is offering her living water, a gratuitous source, a spring. Springs, unlike wells cannot be created by labour alone. They are mysterious by their very nature.

Worth noticing the different titles by which she addresses Jesus. Initially we hear her almost spit out the hated name of Jew. But later, once Jesus has shown her courtesy, she calls him 'sir.'

As the story develops, she sees him as a prophet. Eventually she wonders if he might be the Messiah. By the end Jesus is recognised as the saviour of the world.

Jesus is gradually leading her into the realisation of who he is. 'Ego eimi', the Greek 'I am'. The name of God, and John's gospel gives us the seven 'I am' titles.

If we were asked what God is like in this episode, we might answer God breaks down prejudices. God is forgiving: God knows our past yet accepts us; understands everything; searches for the lonely and the lost; leads to worship.

True worship is to render all honour and glory to the Father, through the Son, in the power of the Holy Spirit.

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