

## Lent III 2020 (Year A)

I love this woman we have just heard about. A brave woman, who questions and isn't ashamed to show her vulnerabilities. She is feisty (if I am allowed to say such a thing in this day and age!) and becomes, despite her own doubts, an evangelist. At the same time, it is as much a journey for Jesus as for her because he too is responding to being in a 'foreign' location, amongst a people who aren't his own.

There is so much in this passage we could focus on. It is the first of the large episodes which John the master narrator uses in the Gospel, and I have always found it profoundly moving. The whole point of the scenario is to allow ourselves to be present at the well. John wants us to know that we are bystanders and called to identify with the action taking place.

Imagine this dusty scene in the heat of the day. Jesus is sat near the well, and the woman arrives. I wish we knew her name! Think of those encounters at wells in the Old Testament: Abraham's servant's meeting with Rebecca who becomes Isaac's wife; Jacob's meeting with his future wife Rachel. It may seem strange, but there is an element of John wanting us to see courtship in this meeting and indeed throughout the Gospel.

We are to see Jesus as the Bridegroom – the Bridegroom of Israel, and the Bridegroom of the Church - the Body to which we belong. John the Baptist has spoken movingly in Chapter 3, 'The friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice. For this reason my joy has been fulfilled. He must increase and I must decrease.' Don't forget, either, that the first sign Jesus carries out is at a wedding feast at Cana, when Mary tells the servants - you and I - servants of the Gospel - to 'Do whatever he tells you.'

So, courtship in a foreign land, and in real terms this encounter is none other than an opening up of the Kingdom of God to all peoples, represented in this damaged and shunned woman. The Samaritan woman is someone beyond the pale yet led on a journey by Jesus and ultimately herself revealing Gospel action with which we should seek to inform our own faith journeys.

She is an outsider, and God knows we can all think of people like her: ignored, abused, on the fringes or worse. We have only to remember the disgusting and shocking cases of young white girls preyed upon on an industrial scale by men largely of Pakistani heritage, whose terrible abuse was ignored by police and social services - or told that they were to blame. Think on the other hand of the disgraceful racial abuse suffered by many people of colour by the white majority, and where those of Asian appearance made fun of or even punched in the face during this current Covid-19 crisis. We have rising anti-Semitism, and the disgrace of refugees – men, women and children - held in holding centers at Gatwick and the like for months on end. Much of this is an indictment of our society. All these people on the fringe are represented by this woman who comes in the heat of the day to the well, alone, because she is an outsider shunned by her own people.

And Jesus talks to her.

He asks the woman for a drink of water, and ultimately offers her the very essence of the fulness of life itself which is found in following him alone, because faith in him is the *'spring of water, gushing up to eternal life.'* She is on a journey of the discovery of faith, and discovers that there are no barriers to the wonder of God's grace. All that is needed is the desire to allow that spring of water, the Holy Spirit, to work on our prejudices, failures and flaws. It's a lifelong journey, and one we don't even know the ending of for this woman. *'Come and see the man who told me everything I have ever done. He cannot be the Messiah, can he?'* That question seems to be left hanging in the air but is nevertheless made after she has already drawn others to come to the Lord. Jesus has taken the broken fragments of her life and drawn her to wholeness through their meeting. She sows the seeds of the Gospel message with others, and when they interact with the Word made Flesh, they too believe.

I have got a little ahead of myself, because we haven't yet encountered the returning disciples. All they can think about is food: *'Rabbi, eat something.'* The one who is the very Bread of Life calls us to feed on the word of God to satisfy our spiritual hunger, and ultimately found in him. Jesus talks of harvest, of sowing and reaping. Although the disciples probably haven't the faintest idea what he is talking about at this point, we, in light of the resurrection, are called to see Jesus as the Sower, and we, as members of the Church, are all beneficiaries of this initial sowing, revealed through Christ's life, death and resurrection. We are also charged to both sow the word and help with the harvest ourselves – it is an essential part of belonging to the Body of Christ.

We are living in unprecedented times. I certainly never remember the like during my lifetime. Many people are understandably worried on numerous counts. This is perfectly natural given the nature of things – it reminds me of Donald Rumsfeld's infamous quote. *'There are known knowns; there are things we know we know. We also know there are known unknowns; that is to say we know there are some things we do not know. But there are also unknown unknowns—the ones we don't know we don't know.'* Well, I fear that this is the sort of language which causes shelves to empty in supermarkets on an unprecedented scale, and where even rational people are drawn to irrational action.

Our faith is revealed in its fulness through God's Son becoming one of us. The one who offers the woman at the well the water of life itself himself cries from the cross, *'I thirst.'* After he dies, blood and water flow from his pierced side. Through Jesus, God abides in every element of our lives to give the knowledge that through him the gates of the Kingdom of Heaven are flung open to all who seek to follow him, and that his abiding love never fails in any situation.

This woman hears the voice of the bridegroom, who leads her on a profound journey where her damaged persona is recreated as she knows the one who is with us too on every step of our journey. Over these unfolding months, let us remember the words of another woman, Julian, who in her Revelations of Divine Love came to know that, *'all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well,'*

Paul speaks for all of us when he says: *I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers,*<sup>39</sup> *nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.* (Romans 8: 38-39)



The Woman at the Well – Hyatt Moore (American) - Collection of Dr. Polly Hodge

### **Exodus 17: 1-7**

**17** From the wilderness of Sin the whole congregation of the Israelites journeyed by stages, as the Lord commanded. They camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink. <sup>2</sup> The people quarrelled with Moses, and said, 'Give us water to drink.' Moses said to them, 'Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the Lord?' <sup>3</sup> But the people thirsted there for water; and the people complained

against Moses and said, 'Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?' <sup>4</sup> So Moses cried out to the Lord, 'What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me.' <sup>5</sup> The Lord said to Moses, 'Go on ahead of the people, and take some of the elders of Israel with you; take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. <sup>6</sup> I will be standing there in front of you on the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it, so that the people may drink.' Moses did so, in the sight of the elders of Israel. <sup>7</sup> He called the place Massah<sup>[test]</sup> and Meribah,<sup>[quarrel]</sup> because the Israelites quarrelled and tested the Lord, saying, 'Is the Lord among us or not?'

### **Romans 5: 1-11**

**5** Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we [or 'let us'] have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, <sup>2</sup> through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. <sup>3</sup> And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, <sup>4</sup> and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, <sup>5</sup> and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.

<sup>6</sup> For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. <sup>7</sup> Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die. <sup>8</sup> But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us. <sup>9</sup> Much more surely then, now that we have been justified by his blood, will we be saved through him from the wrath of God. <sup>10</sup> For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life. <sup>11</sup> But more than that, we even boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.

### **John 4: 5-42**

<sup>5</sup> So he came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. <sup>6</sup> Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon.

<sup>7</sup> A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, 'Give me a drink'. <sup>8</sup> (His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.) <sup>9</sup> The Samaritan woman said to him, 'How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?' (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.)<sup>[a]</sup> <sup>10</sup> Jesus answered her, 'If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, "Give me a drink", you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water.' <sup>11</sup> The woman said to him, 'Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water?' <sup>12</sup> Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?' <sup>13</sup> Jesus said to her, 'Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, <sup>14</sup> but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.' <sup>15</sup> The woman said to him, 'Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water.'

<sup>16</sup> Jesus said to her, 'Go, call your husband, and come back.' <sup>17</sup> The woman answered him, 'I have no husband.' Jesus said to her, 'You are right in saying, "I have no husband"; <sup>18</sup> for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!' <sup>19</sup> The woman said to him, 'Sir, I see that you are a prophet. <sup>20</sup> Our ancestors worshipped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem.' <sup>21</sup> Jesus said to her, 'Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. <sup>22</sup> You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. <sup>23</sup> But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. <sup>24</sup> God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.' <sup>25</sup> The woman said to him, 'I know that Messiah is coming' (who is called Christ). 'When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us.' <sup>26</sup> Jesus said to her, 'I am he, the one who is speaking to you.'

<sup>27</sup> Just then his disciples came. They were astonished that he was speaking with a woman, but no one said, 'What do you want?' or, 'Why are you speaking with her?' <sup>28</sup> Then the woman left her water-jar and went back to the city. She said to the people, <sup>29</sup> 'Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?' <sup>30</sup> They left the city and were on their way to him.

<sup>31</sup> Meanwhile the disciples were urging him, 'Rabbi, eat something.' <sup>32</sup> But he said to them, 'I have food to eat that you do not know about.' <sup>33</sup> So the disciples said to one another, 'Surely no one has brought him something to eat?' <sup>34</sup> Jesus said to them, 'My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work. <sup>35</sup> Do you not say, "Four months more, then comes the harvest"? But I tell you, look around you, and see how the fields are ripe for harvesting. <sup>36</sup> The reaper is already receiving wages and is gathering fruit for eternal life, so that sower and reaper may rejoice together. <sup>37</sup> For here the saying holds true, "One sows and another reaps." <sup>38</sup> I sent you to reap that for which you did not labour. Others have laboured, and you have entered into their labour.'

<sup>39</sup> Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman's testimony, 'He told me everything I have ever done.' <sup>40</sup> So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them; and he stayed there for two days. <sup>41</sup> And many more believed because of his word. <sup>42</sup> They said to the woman, 'It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Saviour of the world.'