

Sermon on the 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Lent, 12.03.2023, Exodus 17.1-7; John 4.5-42

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Strength and our Redeemer. Amen.

Dear Friends,

Somebody once asked their Scottish neighbour:

Ma'am! How long has your son been swimming underwater?

She answered, Ever since I threw a penny into the river.

Today's readings make connections to one of the four elements namely water. Of course, nobody we meet in the readings is literally swimming, but water is essential for life. If we want to live we must drink water plenteously. Roughly 60% of our bodies is made up of water. It is recommended we drink at least 2 litres of water a day to stay healthy.

Without water we cannot live more than three days. Many of us having failed to drink enough water during any period of time will have felt prematurely tired or will have developed a headache. Be that as it may the people of Israel thirsted in the wilderness due to the lack of water to drink. However, the Lord showed his love for the Hebrew people by providing them with water to drink from a rock.

Similar life-giving miracles happen a few times during the people of Israel's time in the wilderness. Saint Paul records one such instance to make a theological point. "For they drank from the spiritual rock that followed them, and the rock was Christ." (1Cor 10.4) To better understand the point Paul is making it is helpful to know what some Rabbis thought. That not the miracle and a care of God had a continuity, but the rock, that certain rock, followed them. Imagine this! There is the cloud by day and the fiery pillar by night and behind them the rock out of which water flows is walking...

In the Gospel, we overhear Jesus' conversation with the Samaritan woman. A dialogue that opens up a new understanding of the Word that is Christ.

The Evangelist has already recoded aspects of the "newness" that Jesus brings, as made manifest in the Messianic wine from the Wedding at Cana that is both special and abundant, as well as God's renewed temple and the rebirth through water and spirit. In today's reading he attempt to describe the gift of God making himself known in Jesus. John describes Jesus as a spring of fresh water, of life-giving water springing up to eternal life; worthy of prayer to God, who is Spirit, which is prayer according to the spirit of truth. And what's more, John insists that Jesus' food is to be doing the Father's will. Part of doing God's will is missionary, as we labour in those fields ripe for harvest.

This is certainly one of the most dramatic passages in John's Gospel. Different characters speak - the narrator, Jesus, the Samaritan woman, the disciples, the people of the town - and we feel like we are sitting in a theatre and watching a play. Another characteristic of this Johannine gospel scene is that in the dramatic play it is the stage is cleared for the dialogue

with the woman for the woman to leave before the conversation with the disciples. The woman's jar, which she leaves behind in, is a stage sign, suggesting to the audience that she will return. And dramatic progress is made with regard to the religious knowledge of the woman and the people of the town concerning Jesus. Jesus is first identified as a Jew, then as a prophet, then as the Christ, and finally he is the saviour of the world.

In order to clarify what I said above here a few additional comments.

The relationship of the Jews with the Samaritans, who bordered Galilee to the north and Judea to the south, was traditionally bad. Around 722 BCE, the Assyrian army invaded the Kingdom of Israel in the north by force, deported its population for them never to return; foreigners were settled on the abandoned land, who in the course of centuries came to adopt aspects of the Hebrew religion. The Jews in Jerusalem always regarded them with suspicion and hatred as a half-pagan conquerors. (2 Kings 17:23-41 gives a brief summary of the story.) That is why the woman is rightly surprised when Jesus suddenly speaks to her, asking her to draw water from the well for him and then even leans over to drink from her water jar.

In verse 6, Jesus is very human as he sits at the well in the midday heat exhausted by the morning's journey. John usually paints Jesus in divine colours. The woman is also very human. The fact that she appears at the well at noon, much later than the other women of the village, who would have customarily drawn water earlier in the day, before the heat of the day, could indicate that her position in the village's society was one of isolation. Why? Because she was immoral having a number of husbands and currently living in inappropriate relationship. Yet she will become the one who gains new strength from the healing words spoken by Jesus and becomes a missionary to her people. The Word of the Lord Christ prompts her to believe, which breaks her isolation, allowing her to become a missionary.

The narrative, as it is conceived by John, brings together different time periods in the life of the apostolic church. This episode seems to be a strong reference to the apostolic church's postresurrection mission in Samaria, as evidenced by the activities of Philip, Peter and John in Acts 8:4-25. This passage could refer to the experience of the community to which John belonged. A community that may have also included converts from Samaria. Converts who had an impact on the life of the community.

Finally, we note that the conversion of the Samaritan woman does not happen because of miraculous signs, but because of the power of Jesus' creative word spoken and heard, "And hearing his word, even more people believed in him..., because we heard it ourselves, and now we know that he really is the saviour of the world."

All of us have the good fortune of living in apartments and houses with following water connected to pipes and faucets. Each of us ought to have a special water pipe to the living water that is Jesus, and this water pipe is a life lived in prayer. As we use the bathroom, the facilities, the kitchen taps daily, prayer should be a tap in our lives that we are opening up continually throughout the day.

At the beginning of this sermon we called to mind how it is not possible to live without water. We need not only water for life, but we also need the living water that is Jesus for the fullness of life. On this beautiful Sunday of Lent the challenge for is for each of us to connect our prayer life to Jesus, who is for all who believe the life-giving water that springs up to eternal life.

Amen.