



SAINT THOMAS CHURCH FIFTH AVENUE
in the City of New York
The Reverend Canon Carl F. Turner, Rector
www.SaintThomasChurch.org

Sunday, March 15, 2020
The Third Sunday in Lent

Choral Eucharist
at 11:00 a.m.

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A Sermon by
The Right Reverend Andrew St. John, *Bishop in Residence*
on
Exodus 17:1-7, Romans 5:1-11, and John 4:5-42
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Living Water for Spiritual Thirst

Years ago I had the extraordinary experience of spending some days in the Sinai Desert in Egypt with a group from St George's College, Jerusalem reflecting on the Exodus experience of the Children of Israel. We were in four-wheel drive vehicles rather than on foot. Can you imagine driving madcap (the drivers seemed out to impress us with their skill and derring-do!) across the road-less terrain which is sand and rock and sand; an alien moonscape. Our destination was to have lunch with a Bedouin community who lived in the desert. After driving for several hours through this hot, harsh and seemingly lifeless desert, we rounded a corner and there to our amazement was a distant oasis which slowly revealed itself as palm trees with animals, children, and activity in the shade beneath them and as we drew even nearer adults appeared quietly in the background. What was at the heart of the oasis was of course a well with its precious water. There in that oasis in the midst of the desert we received the most gracious hospitality with bread freshly baked on tiny fires in the sand.

The other experience I share with you related to today's gospel narrative from John is one I had touring in Zimbabwe many years ago. Driving through that beautiful country on my way to visit cousins before they were forced off their farm I observed the locals (women and children) drawing water from the communal wells along the road and then walking miles to their villages with the precious water balanced on their heads.

Water in a dry land is a precious and essential commodity. And so it was in the dry lands of the Bible. And so it is today in California, Australia and in many parts of the world. So we are told that Jesus came to Jacob's Well near the ancient town of Sychar because he was thirsty and in coming there encountered a local woman who is never named who came to draw water as was undoubtedly one of her daily tasks. The scene seems benign enough. But let me give you a little background. In the verses just before today's long gospel reading we are told: "Jesus left Judea and started back to Galilee. But he had to go through Samaria." Samaria is the hill country between Galilee in the north and Judea to the south; today it is the northern part of the Palestinian Territories which are referred to as the Occupied West Bank. Sychar of old is modern Nablus one of the major towns of Palestine. In ancient time a strict Jew would normally take the long road around Samaria because it was alien territory, inhabited by the Samaritans who were a sort of fundamentalist Jewish sect who claimed to keep the religion of Moses. There was no love lost between Jews and Samaritans which makes Jesus' interactions with them like in this gospel and in the Parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke all the more remarkable. So Jesus was not only on foreign soil as it were but encountered a Samaritan woman. She already has two strikes against her: she was foreign and she was a woman. Later we are told when the disciples returned they "were astonished that Jesus was speaking to a woman."

But there is a third strike against this nameless woman. John notes the time of the encounter carefully: “It was about the sixth hour”, that is about noon. In the heat of the day the last time you would collect water was at noon. It was an early morning or early evening task when it was cooler. As I noted in my Zimbabwe experience collecting water at the well was a social event when the women and children gathered and exchanged news and gossip. But this woman was no ordinary woman: she had had five husbands and the one with whom she now lived was not her husband. In other words she was ostracized by the other women which explained her coming at an unsocial and odd time to draw water. Which all makes Jesus’ encounter with her the more remarkable. His action cuts through some of major divides or barriers of the world of his day: gender, religion, race, and class. It does not sound all that different from modern times. This simple encounter at the well symbolizes the inclusive love of God revealed in the person and work of Jesus Christ. But even more than that is the very place it occurs. Jacob’s Well is still there today and is a site revered by Jews, Christians, and Moslems alike. The well itself speaks of the possibility of the reconciliation of the human family.

So it is that Jesus reveals his need: “Give me a drink.” Jesus, the Incarnate Son of God, has thirst like we do, physical as well as spiritual. This is the same Jesus who cries out from the cross, “I thirst.” Jesus by his Incarnation enters into the reality and sufferings of humankind, those needs of which we are all too well aware including this present, wretched coronavirus.

But his woman is no fading flower. Indeed, the Eastern Orthodox and Eastern rite Catholics give her a name, St. Photine, (from the Greek for “light”) so that she is remembered and honored. She was not afraid to ask questions and to challenge Jesus. “How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?” But Jesus shifts the conversation from water to living water: “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. Jesus engages her on a deeper level. The woman undeterred keeps up her questioning both as to the practicalities of drawing water as well as to Jesus’ identity. “Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob?” To which Jesus replies: “Everyone who drinks 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 in eternal life.”

What I love about these encounters in John’s Gospel like last Sunday’s with Nicodemus is the memorable sayings they give rise to. In response to Nicodemus Jesus says: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.” And in the encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well he gives us: “The water I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up in eternal life.” That image of the gushing spring is as real to us today as it ever was as we love to drink sophisticated mineral waters “fresh from the spring.” I only realized in preparing this sermon that there is another link to the Passion. I mentioned the incarnational link with Jesus’ cry of “I thirst.” But there is also a redemptive link as well. You will remember after Jesus died on the cross the soldiers pierced his side with a spear to prove death. And we are told by John “at once blood and water came out.” That water is none other than the living water that satisfies our spiritual thirst. It is the water signified in the waters of Baptism whereby we are incorporated into the living reality of Christ’s Body, the community of God’s Holy Spirit.

In response to Jesus’ further questioning about, and insights into her marital status the woman returns to the issue of Jesus’ Identity which is at the very heart of this passage. “I see you are a prophet” she says and continues with a discussion about the true place of worship, Mt Gerizim, the Samaritans holy mountain nearby or in Jerusalem. Once again Jesus gives us a memorable saying: “God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.” This saying is much debated in that is this spirit our inner spirit, or does it have an upper case ‘S’ referring to the Spirit of God, or the Spirit of Jesus? I go with the great American biblical scholar Raymond Brown who taught at Union Seminary for many years. He says all true Christian worship is “in the Spirit of Jesus, the Holy Spirit” in which we share through our baptism giving the saying a much more robust and corporate sense.

But this discussion leads in turn to Jesus revealing himself to the woman for the first time in John's Gospel as the Messiah after the woman declares her own faith in the coming Messiah. Jesus says to her: "I am he, the one who is speaking to you." "Ego eimi" in the Greek; "I am". This use of the verb "to be" harks back to Exodus when God reveals himself to Moses as "I am who I am." That this revelation takes place to the unnamed marginal foreign woman is all the more remarkable. And it sets the stage for all that is to come. Jumping ahead in today's long gospel the narrative ends on a high note when the Samaritans from the town to whom the woman had witnessed came to see for themselves and declared: "It is no longer because of what you have said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves and we know that this is truly the Savior of the world."

O Savior of the World who through Thy cross and passion has redeemed us; save us and help us we humbly beseech Thee. Amen.