

14-15 March 2020

3rd Sun of Lent (A)
Exodus 17:3-7; Romans 5:1-2, 5-8; John 4:5-42

“If you knew the gift of God and who is saying to you, ‘Give me a drink’, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water.”

In these unprecedented times, it’s only natural to worry about what will happen in the coming weeks and months. But even in the midst of our worries and anxieties, Jesus comes to us. Last weekend, at the end of the gospel reading about his transfiguration, Jesus told his disciples to “Rise, and do not be afraid.” This weekend, Jesus comes to offer us his living water, water of his divine life that he gives us to drink.

For this weekend and the next two weekends, we shift from Matthew’s gospel to John’s gospel. We’ll hear about Jesus’s interactions with various people and how they come to believe in him. These passages are particularly apropos for our catechumens, our elect, who will be receiving the sacraments of initiation at Easter.

But for all of us, we who are thirsting for peace and health in mind and body at this time, we can look to Jesus and how he encounters the Samaritan woman in today's gospel for inspiration.

First, Jesus goes into Samaria. It would have been unthinkable for any Jewish person to go into Samaritan territory intentionally, much less interact with anyone in it. But Jesus goes near a town and rests by a well, apparently thirsty, at about noon. This again would have been unusual, as people would normally draw water in the morning or the evening, when it was cooler.

And Jesus then encounters a Samaritan woman, who comes to draw water herself. It's not a coincidence that she comes to draw water during the hottest time of day as well—as we find out later, she has had several husbands, and thus is probably a social outcast. But Jesus asks her for a drink, which then starts a conversation.

The woman herself is incredulous that Jesus would talk with her: “How can you, a Jew, ask me, a Samaritan woman, for a drink?” Thus Jesus is bridging virtually every possible social and cultural divide operative at the time.

He then offers the woman “living” water, which she thinks means that he knows where a spring or river is. It’s a subtle play on words: “living” can refer to a flowing source of water, as opposed to a well or cistern.

But Jesus is referring to the living water of eternal life:

“Everyone who drinks this [earthly] water will be thirsty again; but whoever drinks the water I shall give will never thirst; the water I shall give will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.”

The woman still thinks he is referring to some kind of physical water, so Jesus shifts gears in the conversation, in order for her to understand who he truly is. The conversation shifts to her husbands, and Jesus shows his clairvoyance by correctly stating that she has had multiple husbands and is currently living with a man who is not her husband.

Finally the woman realizes that she is talking to someone special, although it will take another step in the conversation about worshipping God in Spirit and truth for Jesus finally to confirm to her that he is the Messiah. Through all of their conversation, Jesus does not judge or condemn the woman. He encounters her gently, disarmingly, and gradually unfolds with her his true identity. He builds up and confirms her faith, little by little.

For her part, the woman leaves her water jar at the well, the whole reason why she came out there to begin with, and goes back into the town. Now unafraid of her status as a social outcast, she spreads the Good News about whom she encountered at the well. She basically evangelizes the town, preparing the way for Jesus himself to come and stay with them, and thus helps them to come to believe in him. All because of a conversation that started at a well, at a strange time of day, between two unlikely people.

It's probably not a coincidence that the woman is never given a name in the story. I think it's because we are meant to see ourselves in her shoes as well, we who have our fears and worries, who have made mistakes we're not proud of, who may feel outcast in our own ways, even from God. We whom Jesus approaches gently and peacefully, thirsting for our faith, for relationship with us, and whom he can transform into missionaries to the people around us in need of the Good News. All we need to do is thirst for and accept the living water of eternal life that Jesus offers us.

Saint Paul says that the love of God has been poured out into our hearts through the Spirit who has been given to us. May this love sustain us in these days and weeks ahead, and may Jesus our living water satisfy our deepest thirsts, our deepest desires for peace and health in mind, body, and spirit.