

Commentary to the Third Sunday of Lent - Year A

THERE'S A PRICELESS WATER

Introduction

For many years, the Jews in the Sinai experienced thirst and the lure of mirages. They dug wells and dreamed of a land where water falls from the sky in the form of rain and dew, where springs gush and flow through the valleys. Nomads in a desolate wilderness associated the sunny and arid lands with death, water with life, and beauty with God's blessings. They thought of the Lord as "*he who summons the waters of the sea and pours them out upon the earth*" (Am 5:8).



In the Bible, the image of water occurs in the most varied contexts. The lover contemplates his beloved: "*Fountains that bedew the gardens, a well of living waters, gushing streams from Lebanon*" (Song 4:15). God assures the deportees a prosperous and happy future with promises related to water: "*For water will break out in the wilderness and streams gush forth from the desert. The thirsty ground will become a pool, the arid land springs of water*" (Is 35:6-7; 41:18). Moving away from the Lord means making choices of death. It is equivalent to remaining without water: "*They have forsaken me, the fountain of living water to dig for themselves leaking cisterns that hold no water*" (Jer 2:13).

The heartfelt words of the prophet who calls his people to conversion—*Come here all of you who are thirsty, come to the water!*" (Is 55:1)—are the prelude to those spoken by Jesus in the Temple Mount: "*Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and let the one who believes in me drink*" (Jn 7:38). He is the source of pure water that quenches all thirst.

• [REDACTED]

“Quench us with your water, Lord, do not allow us to approach other wells.”

First Reading: Exodus 17:3-7

In those days, in their thirst for water, the people grumbled against Moses, saying, “Why did you ever make us leave Egypt? Was it just to have us die here of thirst with our children and our livestock?” So Moses cried out to the Lord, “What shall I do with this people? A little more and they will stone me!” The Lord answered Moses, “Go over there in front of the people, along with some of the elders of Israel, holding in your hand, as you go, the staff with which you struck the river. I will be standing there in front of you on the rock in Horeb. Strike the rock, and the water will flow from it for the people to drink.” This Moses did, in the presence of the elders of Israel. The place was called Massah and Meribah, because the Israelites quarreled there and tested the Lord, saying, “Is the Lord in our midst or not?”

After the exodus from Egypt and the crossing of the Red Sea, the Israelites, led by Moses, took to the road in the desert to reach the Promised Land. At first, the trip was tackled with energy and enthusiasm. Then, assured of the protection of their God, the Israelites showed their gratitude by raising a hymn to the Lord who “*has gloriously triumphed, horse and rider he has thrown into the sea*” (Ex 15:1).

Soon, however, the difficulties began: the sweltering heat, fatigue, serpents, hunger, and especially thirst. Finding water in the desert is not easy. It is the lack of water that defines the desert character. There are only stones and sand, some acacia, scattered bushes, and a few grass stems. So the Israelites cry out to Moses: “*This place is horrible, it is no place for grains or figs or vines or pomegranates, and there is not even water for drinking*” (Num 20:5).

The people think they are being led to certain death. They begin to doubt the faithfulness of God to his promises. They come to suspect that the deliverance from Egypt was a trap. The people think that God does not want to lead them to freedom and life but death. They argue with him and conclude that it is necessary to test, fight, tempt and force him in some way to show what he has in mind.

The last words of the reading are the synthesis of their challenge: “*Is the Lord with us or not?*” (v. 7). This incident happened was called Massa-Meribah, two words in Hebrew that mean temptation–discussion.

God responds to this challenge in his own way. He does not react with threats or punishment but understands his people's fragility, difficulties, doubts, and perplexities. He knows that there are times in which it is really hard to continue to believe and trust in him. Hearing the people's protests, he calls Moses to take a firm hold on the staff with which he crossed the Nile and orders him to bring forth water from the rock.

Why did he want it to look like a miracle? He could have solved the difficulty most simply and straightforwardly: suggesting the direction towards the nearest oasis or indicating where to dig a well, so even the people would have cooperated to solve the problem. Instead, he chose to make a miraculous sign to show the Israelites that the water was not the result of their efforts, commitment, or ability. It was a gift, only his and completely free.

The rabbinical commentaries have enriched this story with legendary traits. One of these is of interest to us in a particular way: the rabbis said the rock no longer remained fixed from that day on. It had accompanied the people throughout their wandering in the desert. It climbed the mountains and descended into the valleys in a perpetual gush of water. This detail is important because Paul has identified the rock with Christ (1 Cor 10:3-4). He is the one who does not cease to quench the thirst of the pilgrim people of God.

The experience of Israel that comes out of Egypt is repeated in the life of every Christian. Each conversion is an abandonment of the 'land of slavery' and marks the beginning of an exodus. The first moments of a new life can be pretty serene, mainly if supported by goodwill and enthusiasm and encouraged and assisted by the brothers in the faith. Then begins the inevitable regret, nostalgia and, sometimes, the disappointing experience of the life of the Christian community.

Doubts, qualms, hesitation, and the temptation to call into question their choice. There is a felt need for some sign claiming proof of loyalty from God. There's no wonder that these hard times come. They are the sign they have arrived, as Israel in Massa-Meribah. The Lord will also show his patience with us. With our weak faith, he will offer a sign: prodigious water gushing from Christ, his Spirit, his word, and his bread.

Second Reading: Romans 5:1-2.5-8

Brothers and sisters: Since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith to this grace in which we stand, and we boast in hope of the glory of God.

And hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us. For Christ, while we were still helpless, died at the appointed time for the ungodly. Indeed, only with difficulty does one die for a just

person, though perhaps for a good person one might even find courage to die. But God proves his love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us.

During difficulties and the uncertainties of life, we can also think that God has abandoned us and that our hope does not have a solid foundation. On what can we base it? On our good works? If that were true, if God's blessing depended on our own merit, we could never be sure of salvation. We would constantly live anxious and worried because we are aware of our weakness and fragility. We know that we could easily deviate from the right path.

Paul assures us today. Hope is not founded on our good works but God's love. It is not as weak, inconsistent, and uncertain as our love. We can love only the good friends, those who do us good. For these, we could, in some exceptional cases, even be willing to sacrifice our life. God is different. He loves people even if they are his enemies and has shown evidence of this: while they refused his love, despised him, kept themselves away from him, he sent them his Son (vv. 7-8). For this reason—the apostle assures—*our hope does not disappoint us*” not because we are good, but because he is good (vv. 1-2).

Gospel: John 4:5-42

Jesus came to a town of Samaria called Sychar, near the plot of land that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. Jacob's well was there. Jesus, tired from his journey, sat down there at the well. It was about noon.

A woman of Samaria came to draw water. Jesus said to her, “Give me a drink.” His disciples had gone into the town to buy food. The Samaritan woman said to him, “How can you, a Jew, ask me, a Samaritan woman, for a drink?”—For Jews use nothing in common with Samaritans.—Jesus answered and said to her, “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.” The woman said to him, “Sir, you do not even have a bucket and the cistern is deep; where, then, can you get this living water? Are you greater than our father Jacob, who gave us this cistern and drank from it himself with his children and his flocks?” Jesus answered and said to her, “Everyone who drinks this 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 said to him, “Sir, give me this water, so that I may not be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water.”

Jesus said to her, “Go call your husband and come back.” The woman answered and said to him, “I do not have a husband.” Jesus answered her, “You are right in saying, ‘I do not have a husband.’ For you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband.

What you have said is true.” The woman said to him, “Sir, I can see that you are a prophet. Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain; but you people say that the place to worship is in Jerusalem.” Jesus said to her, “Believe me, woman, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You people worship what you do not understand; we worship what we understand, because salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming, and is now here, when true worshipers will worship the Father in Spirit and truth; and indeed the Father seeks such people to worship him. God is Spirit, and those who worship him must worship in Spirit and truth.” The woman said to him, “I know that the Messiah is coming, the one called the Christ; when he comes, he will tell us everything.” Jesus said to her, “I am he, the one speaking with you.”

At that moment his disciples returned, and were amazed that he was talking with a woman, but still no one said, “What are you looking for?” or “Why are you talking with her?” The woman left her water jar and went into the town and said to the people, “Come and see a man who told me everything I have done. Could he possibly be the Christ?” They went out of the town and came to him. Meanwhile, the disciples urged him, “Rabbi, eat.” But he said to them, “I have food to eat of which you do not know.” So the disciples said to one another, “Could someone have brought him something to eat?” Jesus said to them, “My food is to do the will of the one who sent me and to finish his work. Do you not say, ‘In four months the harvest will be here’? I tell you, look up and see the fields ripe for the harvest. The reaper is already receiving payment and gathering crops for eternal life, so that the sower and reaper can rejoice together. For here the saying is verified that ‘One sows and another reaps.’ I sent you to reap what you have not worked for; others have done the work, and you are sharing the fruits of their work.”

Many of the Samaritans of that town began to believe in him because of the word of the woman who testified, “He told me everything I have done.” When the Samaritans came to him, they invited him to stay with them; and he stayed there two days. Many more began to believe in him because of his word, and they said to the woman, “We no longer believe because of your word; for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the savior of the world.”

John never refers to the literal facts of Jesus’ life. Instead, he interprets them and uses them to compose dense pages of theology: it is never easy to establish what happened. The case of the Samaritan is an example. The symbolism that accompanies the whole story seems so obvious that someone cast doubt on the event's historicity and thought that this is a literal composition of the evangelist. Instead, we believe that there was a meeting of Jesus with a Samaritan woman. Still, he wrote with the language, images, and biblical references with which he wanted to convey a theological message.

In our review, we keep in mind two levels—the historical and the theological—focusing our attention on the second. In ancient times, the well was the place where people came together. At the well, the shepherds met to water their flocks. The traders stopped with their wares waiting

for customers. The women went to the well to draw water (and maybe even have a chat ...). Lovers go to the well to seek a companion.

The Bible tells of many of these meetings at the well (I suggest you read the following: Gen 24:10-25; 26:15-25; 29:1-14; Ex 2:15-21). The one read in today's Gospel has Jesus and a Samaritan woman as protagonists. The well mentioned still exists. It is located along the road that leads from Judea to Galilee. It is more than three thousand years old, is extremely deep (32 m), and still gives good, freshwater, as in the time of Jesus. It was the place where all travelers would stop, rest, and regain strength. Even Jesus, tired from his journey, sits on the well. It is noon when a woman comes to draw water, and Jesus asks her for a drink.

The woman's surprise is understandable: from the accent, we immediately realize that he is a Galilean, unpopular with her people. How dare he ask her for a drink, a Samaritan woman? Why does he violate the strict rule that forbids him to speak alone with unknown women? The rabbis taught that even when asking for information, words should be minimal. There is a celebrated episode of Rabbi Jose, the Galilean, at a crossroad, asking a woman: 'Which road leads to Luz?' Recognizing him, she replied: 'You talk too much with a woman. You only have to say 'Luz.''

Since this is the mentality, it also explains the wonder of the disciples. Upon returning from the village where they went to buy food, they find Jesus with a Samaritan woman. The free attitude of the Master offers food for thought, although marginal about the theme of the passage. Jesus demands from the disciples a purity of heart and intention. He is even stricter on this point: "*Anyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart*" (Mt 5:28) but behaves freely and rejects all forms of discrimination.

After this introduction, we come to the central part of the passage, i.e., the dialogue between Jesus and the Samaritan woman (vv. 7-26). First, it is important to understand who this woman is. How the evangelist presents her reveals his intention to transform her into a symbol. Let us try to identify her: she has no name, and nothing is said about where she comes from. The only element that defines her is that she is a 'Samaritan,' equivalent to being a heretic, unfaithful to God. Who can it be?

She comes to the well, and the well in the Bible—as we have noted—is often the meeting place between lovers that end up getting married. There is something curious here. To leave Jesus and the woman alone, the evangelist, in a rather clumsy and unlikely way, sends the disciples away with the excuse of "*going into town to buy some food*" (v. 8).

Who do two 'lovers' at the well represent? The Old Testament often speaks of the people of Israel as the bride to whom the Lord is tied with an unfailing affection (keep in mind that Israel, in Hebrew, is feminine). This marriage did not have a happy outcome. The falling in love started in the desert where God and Israel had lived through unforgettable experiences. At these moments, the Lord looked back nostalgically: "*I remember your kindness as a youth, the love*

of your bridal days when you followed me in the wilderness” (Jeremiah 2:2). Then the infidelity of the bride began, her betrayal, her infatuation for lovers, the nostalgia for the gods of Egypt, the worship of Baal of the Canaanites, the flirt with the gods of the Assyrians, Babylonians, Persians, and finally, even the Romans, causing jealousy in her husband.

What will be the reaction of the Lord? Will it be repudiation, divorce, or punishment? It is not even talked about: *“Who could abandon his first beloved? Says your God... For a brief moment I have abandoned you, but with great tenderness, I will gather my people”* (Is 54:6-7). The Lord will choose another solution. At the cost of humbling himself in front of the unfaithful spouse, he will do a retake, correcting her because his only goal is to reclaim her. *“So I am going to allure her, speak to her tenderly. She will answer me as in her youth, as when she came out of the land of Egypt”* (Hos 2:16-17).

At this point, the identification of the Samaritan woman is taken for granted: it is the bride Israel, backed by her whole story of love and adultery. She had many ‘husbands,’ and the one she has now is not her husband. So then, at the well, Jesus meets her and wants to bring her back to the one true love, the Lord.

Considering this spousal imagery, even the seemingly marginal details of the story are meaningful. First, the strange remark: Jesus had to pass through Samaria: he was not obliged to pass from the geographical point of view. He was in Jordan (Jn 3:22), and it would have been much simpler for him to go back down the river. The ‘had to’ cannot but refer to that irresistible urge of the groom—God—who cannot help but meet his beloved.

He was tired from the trip. It is the only time in the Gospel that Jesus’ fatigue is mentioned. It is not indeed to brief us of his physical stamina. Instead, the detail is introduced to address the long journey, the infinite distance that the Lord has had to travel to find the bride who had abandoned him: from the heights of heaven, he came to earth, driven by an overwhelming, infinite passion. He went down even to the deepest abyss in search of his beloved. No distance, difficulty, nor effort has discouraged him. One immediately thinks of the hymn of the Letter to the Philippians: *“Though he was in the form of God ... he emptied himself, taking on the nature of a servant ... made in human likeness ... humbled himself till death on a cro”* (Phil 2:6-8).

We are introduced to the central theme of the dialogue between Jesus and the Samaritan woman. The disciples went in search of material food. The woman came to draw water from the well. Jesus instead provides to all food and water that they do not know (vv. 10,32).

The thirst of the Samaritan woman is the symbol of the most personal needs that torment the heart of the bride—Israel: the need for peace, love, serenity, hope, happiness, sincerity, consistency, and of God. These are the needs that every human being experiences. The water of the well indicates the tactics and tricks humans use to quench a thirst that no material ‘thing’ can satisfy. The living water that Jesus promises is of another type. It is the spirit of God. It is a love that fills the heart. Those who let themselves be guided by this spirit get peace and do not

need anything else.

The Samaritan woman, at the beginning of the dialogue, thought of material water. She did not even suspect that another type of water could exist. Gradually she began to perceive and accept the proposal of Jesus. The evangelist carefully underlines her progressive discovery. At first, for her, Jesus is a simple wandering Jew (v. 9), then he becomes a master (v. 11), then a prophet (v. 19), and afterward the Messiah (vv. 25-26), finally, to all the people, she proclaims him as the Savior of the world (v. 42).

Through the spiritual journey of the woman of Samaria, John wants the Christians of his community to proclaim the proposed route to every disciple. Before meeting Christ, a person is solely concerned with the material aspects of life. They are important realities, even essential, but not enough. They cannot constitute the sole purpose and goal of life. Only a person who meets Christ, who discovers that he is the 'Savior of the world' and welcomes the gift of his water, feels that all hungering and thirsting can be satiated.

The last part of the Gospel (vv. 28-41) presents the conclusion of the spiritual journey of the Samaritan woman and every disciple. What does this woman do after meeting Christ? She leaves the pitcher (she has no more use for it because now she has found another type of water) and runs to announce her discovery and newfound happiness to others.

The call is to become a missionary, an apostle, or a catechist and tell everyone about the joy and peace experienced by those who meet the Lord and drink his water.

=====
=

READ: Jews considered Samaritans heretics. Jews would never talk to a woman in public. Jesus breaks both social mores. Unlike Nicodemus, the woman is not only curious but comes to faith and becomes an apostle for the people of her town.

REFLECT: Notice the contrast between Nicodemus, the religious leader, and the woman, a heretic in the eyes of the Jews. Jesus does away with sacred places. Now people will find God in a person, Jesus. What does this mean for our sacred places?

PRAY: Everyone has prejudices. Pray that you may be able to recognize your biases and work to overcome them. Let us empty ourselves of all human desires other than that which can fill us most, the love of God.

ACT: Love is shown in many ways: in giving gifts or offering sacrifices. What sacrifice can you offer to God during Lent?

