

20140323Lent3Sermon

The Gospel Theme today centres around water. In the early Church this Sunday was the day on which Catechumen would start their preparations for Baptism on Easter Day so the links to the waters of Baptism are obvious. But as we look at water we see not only the source of life but also of destruction.

Think for a moment of the story of the people of Israel, what the bible tells us about water in their history. We have the story of the Flood, which brought salvation to Noah and his family but death to a sinful world; the crossing of the Red Sea, which meant life and liberty to the Israelites but death to the army of the Pharaoh; and the water from the rock for the Israelites in the dryness desert, which is today's OT Lesson. We will hear more about many of these events in the history of Israel at our Easter Vigil at 6am on Easter Sunday morning as we bless the baptismal water.

This morning's Gospel is about the Woman at the Well and it also centres around the theme of water and life.

The first thing that struck me about this story is it deals with marginalised groups of people. This Samaritan woman seems to represent three oppressed groups to whom Jesus wanted to bring the Gospel, the Good News. Firstly, Women, secondly prostitutes and sexually immoral people generally and thirdly all kinds of outsiders, people who are unclean, infidels, foreigners – you name it – those on the outside.

Our very human saviour, Jesus is hungry and thirsty. His disciples have gone on to town to buy food and Jesus asks help from a person he was supposed to avoid (a strange woman on her own) and furthermore someone he should hate (a Samaritan). The Woman is very surprised at his approach but her surprise allows Jesus to turn the tables and offer her "living water". She, understanding him literally, asks how he can give it as he has no bucket. But the water that Jesus will give is different. Those who drink it will never be thirsty again and it gives eternal life. Again, literally, the woman wants this water that lasts forever. Then she will never have to trudge out to this well again.

So what is this water that Jesus speaks about? It is of course God's Spirit which comes to us in Baptism. Baptism is not just a ritual producing magic effects. It is a sacrament which we all know is the outward, symbolic sign of a deep reality, the coming of God as a force penetrating every aspect of a person's life.

And this happens through our exposure to Jesus and to the Gospel vision of life and our becoming totally converted to that vision. This can only happen through the agency of a Christian community into which we are called to enter, at our baptism, to become new members of the church.

Here we can link to *The Pilgrim's Progress* again. Christian arrives at the Delectable Mountains. Here he meets four shepherds who show him not only the Celestial City in the distance but also the pitfalls that he will encounter as he crosses the Delectable Mountains towards it. It is the vision of the Celestial City that encourages Christian to journey on and he does so in community with the Shepherds who are guarding the sheep that belong to Immanuel. This whole episode in *Pilgrim's Progress* is linked to the local church. Bunyan is using the flock of Immanuel's sheep as a symbol of the local church and the shepherds are the pastors of that church. It is their task to lead the sheep – the people – into all truth by indicating the pitfalls and the dangers of heresy and wrong belief.

The water that Jesus promises that Samaritan woman and us, is closely linked to conversion and forgiveness of sin. Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. But the sin must first be exposed and acknowledged. And Jesus' goal is not just the woman's sin but the whole town from which she comes.

The woman is staggered at Jesus' insight into her life. She is embarrassed and so there is a sudden change of topic to something theoretical and "safe". You just don't know how often I've experienced that when talking about faith with people. They will interrupt with a seemingly important but totally irrelevant question. For instance, talking about the importance of the sacrament of the body and blood in the Eucharist and a question is asked about whether Catholics really worship Mary.

The question the woman asks is about Jewish and Samaritan places of worship: Jerusalem, Mount Zion, holy to the Jews, or Mount Gerizim, holy to the Samaritans. For Christian on his pilgrimage, the Mountains appeared delectable – so why continue to the Celestial City? But the woman's question gives Jesus the opportunity to make another important point. The "holy" well where they are will become irrelevant. So will the Temple of Jerusalem or the mountain of the Samaritans. The Delectable Mountains will be unimportant when compared with the true worship

that Christian will experience in the Celestial City that will be done “in Spirit and in truth”. There will be no more temples. No more local Church that Bunyan can praise because it is not ‘places’ which are holy but the people who use them. It is we who are the Temple of God and the dwelling place of Christ.

The woman goes on to say that when the Messiah comes he will tell all about this. At that point Jesus tells her that he is the Messiah. Now that is extraordinary! This is the first time in John’s Gospel that Jesus admits this. And to whom does he admit it? To a religious outsider and a multiple adulterer at that. But that is precisely the sort of people who need to hear it. People who are healthy do not need the doctor, only the sick.

Christian is taken by the Shepherds to the different cliffs on top of hills with delightful names such as the Hill called Error; the Hill called Cautious; the byway to Hell. Then Christian is taken to the Hill Clear where he can see through a blurred telescope the Celestial City.

In our Gospel, the disciples now return. Men of their time and culture, they are amazed to see Jesus talking alone to this woman and despised outsider. They don’t know what to say. They offer Jesus food but they are told he has food they know nothing about. “Not on bread alone does man live but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.” Jesus’ food is his total identification with the will of his Father and doing his work. “Happy are those who hear the word of God and keep it.” Linked with the idea of bread and feeding, Jesus tells them that the harvest is great and it is ripe. That harvest now includes Samaritans (including this woman) and all outsiders, aliens, unbelievers, sinners... It is a harvest that has been prepared by others.

We are told that many Samaritans came to believe in Jesus because of the woman’s witnessing. Then they asked him to stay with them, otherwise he would have continued on his journey. Jesus often needs to be invited to stay. We need just remember the two men walking to Emmaus. He would not have stopped if they had not invited him to stay the night. As the writer of Revelation tells us, he stands at the door and knocks but he will not come in unless invited.

As a result, in this story many in that Samaritan village came to believe in Jesus. And they said: “It is no longer because of what you [the woman] said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Saviour of the World.”

The four Shepherds realise that Christian will go on to the Celestial City and they give him advice, one gives him a map, another tells him to avoid the flatterer, a third prays for his safety and speed.

All of us have been given our maps, warnings and prayers for our pilgrim journeys. The faith has been handed on to us and must become our own faith. So that, even if everyone around us were to abandon Jesus, we would not. Ultimately faith is totally personal. “I live, no not I, but Christ lives in me.” Our faith is a faith developed through what we have learnt on the Delectable Mountains, through awareness of what we should avoid on Hill Cautious and Hill Error and be encourage from what we see on Hill Clear.

So let us pray today that all of us who will be renewing our baptismal vows this Easter may find that life-enriching faith for our lives.

So Christian passes through the Valley of Humiliation as he journeys towards the Celestial City. Let us sing as a prayer the song of the Boy that Christian hears in that valley. Hymn no 218