

Third Sunday of Lent – A Readings

In writing his Gospel St. John is always playing it at two levels: the material and the spiritual. The one is the most obvious, but at certain points breaks down and becomes implausible, and when that happens we are invited to catch the clue that something else is going on.

In addition to that, St. John uses scenes from the Old Testament as a way of framing what is going on. In today's Gospel he makes the seemingly offhand comment that the well Jesus finds himself at is the very one that Jacob had given to his son Joseph.

Of course, nothing in John's gospel is an offhand remark. The story of Jacob's well in the book of Genesis will shed some needed insight into what's at stake in the story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman.

I'm going to guess that you are not up to speed on Jacob and his well, so the point most worth remembering is that it's the place where he meets Rachel, who will become his favorite and the mother of Joseph.

There's conflict involved about water rights and who gets to have water when. Jacob takes matters into his hands and makes sure that Rachel and her flocks have water when they need it, and will not have to wait for it to become available.

The woman at the well is a story about opening the well of eternal life now. There is no need to wait until the end of time when "all the flocks" will drink together. The time of waiting is over.

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The woman comes to draw water, and by the time she has finished talking to Jesus, her thirst will be quenched, but not in a way that she first imagined.

Jesus asks for a drink, but he is a drink, too. Jesus has a thirst to share God's life with others. He is living water looking for someone who is thirsty. When the thirsty drink from the water he offers, Jesus himself gets a drink.

By the time their conversation is ended both the Samaritan woman and Jesus are satisfied. She leaves her water jar by the well and goes back into the town to tell others who she has found, the Messiah.

Jesus tells the disciples that he has no need for the food and drink that they have purchased. He has food (drink would work just as good) that the disciples don't know about. This food is to do the will of him who sent him. God's will is that our thirst for God be quenched.

There's good reason why this reading is used to celebrate the first scrutiny of those preparing for baptism at Easter. In the course of your catechumenate you have had a chance to identify what motivates you to take this step. You want something you don't have, and have discovered that it's God and the living water he offers.

And you know that being able to receive that living water means being willing to make room for it. You have to be willing to listen to the one who gives it, even though there are other voices, other ways of thinking and feeling, that can get in the way.

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The Samaritan woman had tried to construct her own happiness and it never worked. Jesus gently brings that up so that she can admit it, let it go, and be ready for the gift he has in store for her.

The scrutinies serve the same purpose. In this final phase we do all the we can to become open and available to God's grace. We allow ourselves to hunger and thirst, trusting that God will provide a remedy.

Jesus knows no barriers when it comes to reaching out to those who are open to his ministry. His own disciples appear in this story to be quite dense and stuck on the level of the material. He finds one person, though, the woman at the well, who is willing to get past the cultural barriers and let the Lord minister to her.

Whatever barriers have kept us from him in the past, we are also now invited to let them go, put them aside and out of the way. Whatever has weighed you down in the past, whatever vain attempts you've trusted in before, acknowledge them as falling short, so that you can be ready for what God is offering: salvation which begins now, and continues through the Easter sacraments into the fullness of life with God.