

The Catholic Parish of Petworth & Midhurst West Sussex

Fr Peter's Homily for The Third Sunday of Lent (Year A) 12th March 2023

This is quite a long Gospel story, but it belongs to that group of stories that are perhaps the most memorable in all the scriptures: stories of a meeting with Jesus Christ that leaves a person changed for ever. Lets look at what happens.

Jesus is on a long journey, and he is tired. He knows the countryside, so he knows there will be a well here, and he comes here to rest. As he is sitting by the well, a Samaritan woman approaches. Now this is embarrassing. Jews and Samaritans don't speak to one another; certainly a woman and a man won't speak, and absolutely not when they are strangers. But Jesus watches as she approaches, and before she has a chance to draw any water, he speaks to her. More than that, he asks her to do something for him: he, a Jewish man, puts himself at a disadvantage, a place of weakness, compared to a Samaritan woman. This is beyond extraordinary: 'What!' she cries out in astonishment. And then begins this wonderful conversation. To her credit she is not scared of him, not scared of joining in, asking questions, responding to his words. As you read this story, it seems much less like a conversation and much more like some sort of a dance. It is as if Jesus says to her 'lets engage with one another, lets act and react, lets dance!' And then first he speaks, she responds, he speaks, she speaks and so it goes on, word after word which reads like step after step as he dances her to a new place, a new way of looking at her world.

In mission countries, where large groups of converts are to be baptised at Easter, this story plays a really important role in their journey of faith. On this Sunday the priest prays over the converts, now so close to baptism, saying 'You are the fountain for which they thirst, you are the Master whom they seek'. Jesus begins by speaking of his thirst, but he talks (or dances) the Samaritan woman to a place where she realises that she, herself, feels a deep and raging thirst. She is thirsty for the truth, thirsty for love and acceptance, thirsty for mercy, thirsty for the resources she needs to put her life straight, to get things right, to make sense of what she is here for, how to live a life that is good, and true and beautiful. And once he has brought her to this place, when she realises that she is parched and dry and fainting with the need, he offers her living water. They started their conversation, their dance, far apart – almost talking at cross-purposes, but by the end Jesus has gradually brought her closer and closer until they are speaking the same language. It is a masterpiece of persuasion.

Now, once this has happened, the dance is over. He has moved her to a new place, a new vantage point from which to see the world. She is now thinking 'I want what he has got' and so in a sense the Lord's work is done. The disciples come back and break up the dance 'What are you talking to her for?' What will happen next? The woman (who is so important, of course, but whose name we do not know) does something you might have missed, but something very significant. She sets off back to the town to tell everyone what has happened, but first she puts down her water jar. The jar that she had brought all the way to the well to fill with water; the jar that would have been one of the family's most important – and perhaps also most costly – possessions, is left redundant by the well. She had gone to all the trouble of bringing it, but now it is left behind. The precious water jar, without which the family cannot survive, the jar for

carrying the stuff of life, has suddenly become an encumbrance, a burden, something that keeps her from more important things. She would rather have a physical thirst than a spiritual one; she has discovered just how parched and dry her soul is, and sorting this out is now her number one priority. The old life is left behind at the well.

So, the woman hurries back to the town. By the end of her conversation with Jesus she was thinking 'I want what he has got'. Now she goes back to her family, her friends, people she doesn't even know very well, people who probably look down on her (remember, she has had five husbands and is now living with someone who is not her husband) and she says to them, in effect 'I have met an extraordinary man, and after talking with him (dancing with him, you might say) I want what he has got – and you are going to want what he has got too'

In a sense this is a piece of simple evangelisation: telling people you have found Jesus Christ, you want what he has got, and other people are going to want it too.

A few days short of the halfway point through Lent, this story asks us some questions:

What is it that our souls really thirst for? Forgiveness, acceptance, wisdom, hope, healing, joy, meaning – you fill in the answer.

In what way does the Church offer, in the name of Christ, the water to slake our thirst?

What do I need to do to take advantage of that? How do I open myself to the healing, the mercy, the wisdom?

What is my water pot – what are the things that are distracting me, the things I need to leave behind so that I can focus on my deep thirst?

When was the last time I told someone 'I have met the Lord; I want what he has, and I think you are going to want it too'?