
Living Water: Gift and Grace

The water images that run through our readings today provide us with a powerful metaphor for the inner, spiritual life. Lent is a time of self-imposed drought, a time when we're reminded of our deep spiritual need, a time when we draw aside and allow ourselves to be soaked by God's Spirit, so that we can be transformed and renewed. In the Gospel story, life-giving water and thirst are images that Jesus uses in his encounter with the Samaritan woman; come and drink all you who are thirsty. Like a poet, Jesus takes hold of the ordinary visible object near at hand and uses it to reveal deep spiritual reality to a woman who was broken and in pain.

In this Gospel story we find Jesus tired and hot, sitting down beside Jacob's Well in Samaria in the middle of the day, while the disciples go off to find food. And there he met a woman who had come to draw water – a woman who didn't go to the well with the other women in the early hours of the morning, to gather water and to chat, but separately, alone. She went to the well at noon, when she didn't have to talk to anyone, or face anyone, when she could just get her water alone. It's a sad, lonely image.

This woman was a Samaritan; a woman who was seen to be of no value by her Jewish neighbours, a woman seems to have been dismissed by her community as a person with a bad reputation, because she'd had a series of relationships and marriages. We get the sense of a woman who was broken, who didn't feel loved and who felt she was of no value, a woman who was isolated and rejected in her community.

So she goes to draw water from Jacob's Well at noon. And there she finds Jesus, sitting in the heat of the day – tired and thirsty. Jacob's well was a place full of symbolism; a place to meet with the beloved. In Genesis, Abraham sends his servant to his home town to find a bride for his beloved son Isaac. The servant asks God how he will know the right person to choose, and he sets out some conditions. When I ask for a drink at the well, let the right girl say "Drink and I will also water your camels." And so Rebecca is

chosen there as the wife for Isaac. At this well Jacob meets Rachel and Moses meets Zipporah, and it is here, at this deeply symbolic place of encounter between men and women, that the Samaritan woman meets with Jesus. And Jesus looks at her and says ‘Give me to drink’.

In Zeffirelli’s film *Jesus of Nazareth* Mary of Magdala, or Mary of the Roman Camp, who was used to seeing desire and scorn in men’s eyes, says of Jesus ‘He looked at me as no other man has ever looked at me.’ He looked at her as one who saw her secrets, her inner hopes and desires.

And so Jesus says to this broken woman from the despised city of Samaria, ‘I need you; give me a drink.’ And she reacts in shock that he would speak to her. She’s feisty and she’s argumentative, and she challenges Jesus about his theology. ‘You a Jew asking me.....’. But he empowers her, affirms her, teaches her to stand up.

He speaks directly to the place of her pain. If you only knew how much I loved you, how much I yearn for you to become free, free to love, free from the chains of insecurity and neediness that bind you. This water you collect from the well – you need to collect over and over again, and your thirst always comes back. But the spiritual water I can give you will not only satisfy your thirst – it will become in you a spring of water, a spring of life and hope, welling up into the life of God. This water will flow from you and you will become a source of life for others.

Incredible words. Jesus not only affirms her, but affirms who she can become, affirms all that can be beautiful about her life. If you drink from the water I offer, life and hope will flow from you to others.

Perhaps the heart of our brokenness is that we don’t want to know the truth about ourselves. We go to the well at noon, when we don’t have to face up to ourselves, and collect our water alone. We hide behind our masks. We become workaholics, alcoholics, or find other props to mask the pain and neediness. And finally when we are

faced with the truth of our own reality, we are overcome by depression because it's just too much to bear. The only condition for this spring of living water within us is that we realise we are thirsty; that we enter into our thirst; thirst for God, thirst for meaning, thirst for life.

But then Jesus abruptly changes the direction of the conversation. 'Go and get your husband,' he tells her. Jesus puts his finger right on the place of her pain. He doesn't condemn her, doesn't rub her nose in it, doesn't lecture her. Just exposes it, brings it out into the light, and offers her grace. Then he reveals two great truths. God is not pinned down in place, not owned by the Jews or the Samaritans, not restricted to holy places, but is everywhere and available to all. And then he reveals the truth of his mission in the world. He is the Messiah, the one who is called the Christ.

So she leaves her water jar at the well, and goes back to the city. Her life is transformed, and she proclaims him to the people who had rejected her, the people she had avoided. 'Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done'.

To become whole we must first acknowledge our brokenness and pain. To become whole we must accept that we are a mix of beauty and brokenness, of light and dark, of poverty and riches, of love and hate. To become whole, we must allow God to transform the darkness of our lives – to *give* God the darkness, the pain, the mud, the madness, the places of panic.

The story of grace tells us that whoever drinks the water of life that God gives will quench their spiritual thirst. The spiritual longing within human beings is a thirst so vast that it can only be satisfied by Jesus Christ himself. Jesus spoke to the woman of Samaria, the woman who has lived with pain, who has wept much and says, 'Give me to drink.' If you drink of the waters I give you, waters that spring up from the earth, through the dirt, you will allow yourself to know you are loved and your life will be transformed.

For us, as for the Samaritan woman, the life-giving water of Christ bursts into our spiritual drought; the gift of the one who pours his love and grace into every crack and crevice of our lives. When we come to him for living water, for spiritual refreshment, Jesus give us a spring of living water that can run deep inside us, that can transform our brokenness and neediness – and make us a source of life and hope, not just for ourselves, but for each other.

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