

Lent 3rd Sunday (A)

3rd March 2024

'The Living Waters that wash away Sin'

Ex 17: (at Massah in the desert ...)

Rom 5: *Christ died for us while we were still sinners*

Jn 4: 5–42: *Sir, give me some of that water ...*

We're working our way through the major Covenants God made with Israel, the people of the Old Testament(s). **Noah**, 2 wks ago, after the Great Flood, was party to that 1st Covenant: that God was a God who did not seek to destroy or condemn, but to save and forgive. **Abraham**, last Sunday, was willing even to sacrifice his only son, if God commanded it, but had his son saved in a 2nd Covenant, so God could grant him to be the “father of many nations,” a holy people that would know God's Revelation. We come today to **Moses**, the next great recipient of God's ongoing gift of self-revelation. In this particular reading (Ex 17) we don't hear the full-on details of the making of the Covenant — Passover, Exodus, Mt Sinai, Ten Commandments, Tent of Meeting, Rites of Sacrificial worship, each of which is a part of this great Mosaic Law. What we hear, instead, is a tiny episode in that Wilderness-wandering of Israel's 40 testing years *en*

route from Egypt to the Holy Land, from crossing the Red Sea to crossing the River Jordan. Despite their *salvation by water* at the Red Sea, and despite their *salvation by water* (to come) at the River Jordan, yet the people complains that God does not care for them, that He *deprives* them of water, that He has no power over water, and that He cannot seem to save them after all.

Here's where we see the strong thematic connection between this OT 1st Reading, today, and the 1st of the 3 great Lent Gospels from John that we're hearing over these middle Sundays of Lent: Jn 4; Jn 9; Jn 11. The **Exodus reading** with Moses is about *sinfulness* — the manifest distrust of the people in God — and yet despite this His *gift of water* which flows as the wooden staff strikes the rock “at Massah in the desert.” The **John Gospel reading** with the new Moses (Jesus) is also about *sinfulness* — the waywardness of this woman, and her people, and her religion —yet even so, Jesus offers His *gift of a new, living water*, which will duly flow when another wooden stake (the Cross) strikes the Rock of Calvary.

Let's rewind a bit and set the scene where Jesus encounters this Samaritan woman: it's a place I've visited. [Once one has been to the Holy Land as a priest it becomes an occupational hazard to pepper all one's homilies, "when I was last in the Holy Land ..." — because of course so many of the events of the Gospels took place in locations that one is able to see, still, today, on pilgrimage.] Anyway, "when I was once in the Holy Land" we went there to where Jesus met the Samaritan woman, at *Jacob's Well* in what the OT calls Shechem, an important and holy place at the time of Joshua soon after the Israelites entered the Promised Land. Today it's on the outskirts of the Palestinian city of Nablus in the disputed "West Bank." We visited that well reputed to be 'Jacob's Well' within the precincts of a Gk-Orthodox church. In Jesus's own day the town was called Sychar and was in Samaria, and there wasn't much love lost between Jews and Samaritans ... but of course Jesus broke down all such barriers.

The only barrier that Jesus is worried about here is the *barrier of sin*. It seems that this woman may well be a

quite an outcast. Why else would she be struggling to draw her water "at the sixth hour" — at *midday*, in all the heat — and not first thing in the morning like all the other women? Very likely, for the reason of all those 5 husbands! — she was probably shunned by the other women of the town, so she came to draw her water when she wouldn't expect to meet anyone. Jesus invites her interest, through the image of *water*, offering her a water that will never run dry ... but the "living water" that He is offering her is that which will quench the thirst of her parched *soul* ... faith; life in Him; eternal life.

As soon as she asks to have that water, Jesus confronts her, gently and obliquely, with her sins — her husband-swapping — the very thing that has isolated her both from the townspeople and from God too. Her unfaithfulness is quite clear, but Jesus is presenting her with the genuine opportunity for a new chance, a renewed relationship with God in Himself, the Messiah. He is quite clear in His language, not hiding His identity, but presenting Himself to her as the Messiah; not just a.n.other

prophet, but *the* Christ. The woman's response is immediate and heartfelt: she just leaves her water-jar, keen to get back to the town in a hurry and inform others of her find; and so many others come to accept Him and believe in Him.

The whole event has, on the face of it, an *ordinariness* about it. Having been there, it's an ordinary place today as well: a dusty spot, no great luxuries, a sprawling and somewhat poor city of 700k people. Yet, in this ordinary place, Jesus works an extraordinary thing, even in the heart of a woman of some disrepute. He doesn't ignore her because she's of a different race; nor because she's a woman and it was 'not the done thing' to chat to her; nor because she had a number of sins to her name. He overcomes those barriers and calls her to repentance and faith, to the cleansing in water that only He can offer: ultimately, Christian Baptism. And through her He reaches out to many more of her community.

Our Lent can also be quite ordinary: we make some sacrifices, we make some extra efforts; but it can be made an extraordinary time if only we let Jesus truly speak to us.

Especially if we let Him speak those words of truth to us about our sins. Let Him remind you of your sins in the way of gentleness and love: not because He wishes to condemn you — *Did He condemn this Samaritan woman? No!* — but because He wants to forgive you and draw you closer to Himself. In fact He really wants to *wash* you Himself, to make you His beloved bride, cleansed from all stain of sin, and ready for *union* with Himself.

It's the great task of Lent, that we let the Lord draw us gently to Confession, that we may be forgiven our sins. 2½ wks of Lent are over; 4 remain. If you haven't already been to Confession (or if, let's say, you haven't been yet in 2024), then make a decision that you will go between now and Easter. *If you only knew what God is offering ... you would have been the one to ask, and He would give you living water.* Let the Lord truly give you what you need: that forgiveness of sins to live in eternity.

Oh that today you would listen to His voice; harden not your hearts as at Meribah, as on that day at Massah in the desert, when your fathers put Me to the test, when they tried Me, though they saw My work. (Ps 94)