

**Third Sunday of Lent – Year A  
(Mar. 27, 2011)**

**How Do We Thirst?**

Have you ever been in a conversation when you and the person you are talking with seem to be on different wave-lengths, when you are using the same words, but they seem to have different meanings? Well, that's something like what is happening in our Gospel today. It all begins easily enough with Jesus asking for a drink of water. But then everything changes. Jesus in return offers the woman living water. She thinks he is talking about what just came from the well. He is thinking in metaphors like a poet. He offers something better than what comes from the well. He offers her life, eternal life, but she doesn't understand that. It happens often in the Gospels. Perhaps it happens to us too when we read the Gospels. The words don't always mean what we think they mean.

At any rate this is an extraordinary encounter between Jesus and the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well, and in a conversation the like of which we see nowhere else in the Gospels Jesus leads this woman deeper and deeper into the mystery of who he is until finally he reveals to her that he is the Messiah, something that only happens in John's Gospel. But what happens before the revelation is revealing in its own way. Before she can come to know who he is she must admit her sinfulness. Jesus says to her, "Bring your husband here."

"I have no husband."

"Yes, you have had five men and the one you are living with now is not your husband."

And what is her reaction? You might expect her to grow taller with indignation and walk away, or hang her head in shame and slink away, or grow angry and perhaps curse this stranger for the accusation he makes. But no, she does none of these things. Instead she runs back to the town and says to the people, "Here is someone who has told me everything I have done. He must be the Messiah." She admits her sinfulness. The result of that is that the whole town comes out to see for themselves, and when they do, when they have heard him talk, they accept him as well. But none of

that would have happened if she had not admitted her sinfulness.

There are so many things going on in this story. But one of the most striking to me is the reconciliation that occurs as a result of the woman's admission. Jews and Samaritans come together, people who had been enemies for centuries. It reminds me of the situation in Israel today where Jews and Palestinians are so badly in need of reconciliation. Certainly a large part of our prayer today and for the foreseeable future must be that that reconciliation take place so that these people can live side by side in peace. But in our story today there is still more. There is reconciliation between male and female as well. Jesus' action, speaking to a strange woman in public is shocking. It's something that just isn't done. But he does it anyway because he has something more important in mind. What he has in mind is not just revealing who he is, but also doing the work of salvation that the Father had given him to do, and that work will consist of bringing people together, reconciling them to one another, healing the wounds of sin and division.

The Church has always seen this story in connection with baptism because of the water imagery. The first reading today reinforces that interpretation. The Jewish people have been liberated from slavery. But they grumble against God and against Moses because they are in the desert and they are thirsty. Their thirst is physical. What they don't realize is that they are suffering, too, from another thirst, a deeper, spiritual thirst that only God can slake. The water that comes gushing from the rock becomes a symbol of the living water that Jesus promises, living water that we all experience in baptism, water that fills us with the power of the Spirit, water that brings us together into the community of the Church where we, too, experience the saving power of God.

As far back as the earliest days of the Church, the third, fourth, and fifth Sundays of Lent have been the occasion when the catechumens, like the Samaritan woman, are introduced to the mysteries of the faith they will profess at their baptism on Holy Saturday evening. On this third Sunday they ask themselves how do they thirst? How do they admit the darkness of the world in which they live and which is part of their lives. Like the Samaritan woman they admit their sinfulness before they receive the living waters of baptism. Next Sunday they will pray for light to see, that is, with

the eyes of faith as they hear the story of the man born blind, and the following Sunday they will pray for new life, the new life of baptism as they contemplate the raising of Lazarus from the dead.

After their baptism they will be sent forth to evangelize, to tell others about the wonderful things God has done for them, like the Samaritan woman, like the man born blind, like Lazarus. And in the telling they will grow. They will grow in knowledge and love.

Dear friends, these readings are not just for our catechumens and candidates, they are for us as well. As we listen to them on these three Sundays we must ask ourselves three questions: “How do we thirst?” “How are we blind?” “How are we dead?” And we know for sure that God wants to slake our thirst. God wants to open our eyes to see the beauty and wonder of God’s love in our world and all around us. God wants to give us life, real life, and God wants us to live, to really live. It’s the gift of God’s grace that is freely offered. We have only to open our hearts to receive it. The recent events in Japan remind us too tragically that water not only gives life, but it can be destructive as well. We will keep the suffering people of that country in our prayers as we ask ourselves today those three questions – “How do we thirst?” “How are we blind?” “How are we dead?” – fully confident that God will be there with the gifts of living water, of light for us to see, and of new life.