

St Mary's Concord

A Reflection for the Third Sunday of Lent

This reflection is based on the homily preached by Fr Paul Crowley on the readings for the Third Sunday of Lent in Year A: Exodus 17:3-7; Romans 5:1-2, 5-8; John 4:5-42

Why am I a Catholic? Or for that matter, why am I a Christian? A child may answer because my parents are but as adults there should be a point in our lives when we can say my faith no longer depends on my family or teachers or others. I believe because I have experienced God's presence in my own life.

That realisation may have come from a sudden flash of insight or it may have been a gradual awareness of the many ways God is at work in my life.

St John's Gospel is very much about how we come to believe, our journey of faith. The story of the woman at the well is one of a series of encounters. We will hear another story next Sunday when Jesus meets a man who was born blind and the following Sunday the raising of Lazarus.

At the beginning of chapter 4 we find Jesus and his disciples setting out on a journey from Judea back to Galilee; the shortest way was through Samaria. On their journey they stop at Sychar and the disciples went into the town to buy food, leaving Jesus sitting by the well of Jacob.

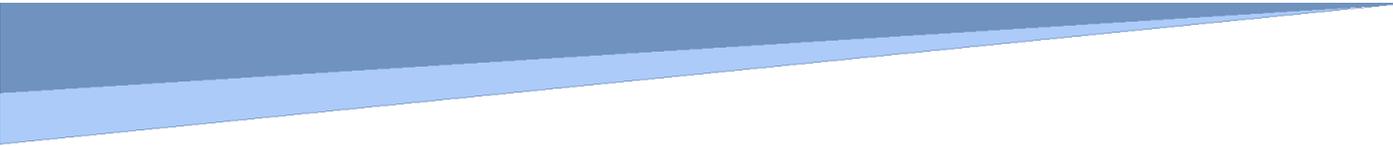
When a Samaritan woman comes to draw water from the well, she sees Jesus as a Jewish pilgrim. The exchange that follows is typical of John's Gospel. What seems to be a misunderstanding is in fact a literary device that allow Jesus to take the encounter to another level.

The woman begins to realise that this is no ordinary pilgrim. As we listen to the exchange, we also understand that this is not just about our need to drink water. In Palestine, as in many arid countries, the main source of water was the village well. But far more valuable was a spring flowing from the rocks, that was "living water".

Only when Jesus tells the woman to go and call her husband does her focus shift. She, like all of us, was caught up in the routine tasks of life, coming to the well each day to draw water. When Jesus offers her living water her reaction is pragmatic – that will mean that I don't have to come here each day to the well to draw water.

Suddenly she is confronted by her own insecurity, "I have no husband", she replies. Now she sees Jesus not just as a pilgrim but as a prophet. But she is still not convinced. The encounter moves to a deeper level, no longer about the practical tasks of life. She reflects on her relationship with God. "Our father worshipped God on this mountain, while you Jews say that Jerusalem is the place we ought to worship."

Her faith is being challenged, where do I find God? How will I recognise the Messiah, the promised one, when he comes? Jesus simply tells her, God is here in this moment, in this encounter, believe in me.



The return of the disciples seems to be a distraction but the exchange about food is yet another example of a literal misunderstanding leading to a deeper reality. The image of the harvest is about his mission.

Meanwhile the woman has gone back to the town to spread the word. She has set out on her mission. And when the other Samaritans come and listen to Jesus, they say, “we no longer believe because of what you told us. We have heard for ourselves and we believe.”

So how is this our story? Like the woman coming to the well, we can easily get caught up in the everyday cares of life. Sometimes it takes some upheaval or tragedy to make us stop. When we acknowledge our own frailty and insecurity, we can find ourselves asking “Is this all there is?”

If we are open to the gift that is being offered to us, this living water, then it has the power to transform our lives. Jesus is the Living Water and to drink is to become one with him.

How do we come to believe? Ultimately not by reading books or listening to homilies. We come to believe through the gift of the Holy Spirit. Our faith is our response to that gift. In the early Christian communities that gift of God was symbolised by the water of Baptism and so also for us. That is why these stories from John’s Gospel have been read during Lent since the earliest centuries.

Baptism is only the beginning of the journey. We meet the risen Christ whenever we gather in his name. And as we support each other on the journey, we, like the Samaritans, need also to be able to say, we believe because we have heard for ourselves.

Last Sunday we saw that the story of the Transfiguration was about remembering those moments, those encounters. Next week in the story of another encounter with Jesus we will hear about what it means to see with the eyes of faith.

Paul Crowley
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