Living Water

This reading overflows with good news that "true worship" is not found in any building or cult, but in the hearts of believers who worship God "in Spirit and in Truth."

Opening Prayer: Lord, you come to us when we are thirsty, tired and lacking faith. You stand by the well, and call to us, you invite us to drink.

Reading 1 EX 17:3-7

In those days, in their thirst for water, the people grumbled against Moses, saying, “Why did you ever make us leave Egypt? Was it just to have us die here of thirst with our children and our livestock?” So Moses cried out to the LORD, “What shall I do with this people? a little more and they will stone me!” The LORD answered Moses, “Go over there in front of the people, along with some of the elders of Israel, holding in your hand, as you go, the staff with which you struck the river. I will be standing there in front of you on the rock in Horeb. Strike the rock, and the water will flow from it for the people to drink.” This Moses did, in the presence of the elders of Israel. The place was called Massah and Meribah, because the Israelites quarreled there and tested the LORD, saying, “Is the LORD in our midst or not?”

Responsorial Psalm PS 95:1-2, 6-7, 8-9.

R. (8) If today you hear his voice, harden not your hearts.
Come, let us sing joyfully to the LORD;
let us acclaim the Rock of our salvation.
Let us come into his presence with thanksgiving; let us joyfully sing psalms to him.
R. If today you hear his voice, harden not your hearts.
Come, let us bow down in worship;
let us kneel before the LORD who made us. For he is our God,
and we are the people he shepherds, the flock he guides.
R. If today you hear his voice, harden not your hearts.
Oh, that today you would hear his voice:
“Harden not your hearts as at Meribah,
as in the day of Massah in the desert, Where your fathers tempted me;
they tested me though they had seen my works.”
R. If today you hear his voice, harden not your hearts.
Reading 2  ROM 5:1-2, 5-8

Brothers and sisters: Since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith to this grace in which we stand, and we boast in hope of the glory of God. And hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us. For Christ, while we were still helpless, died at the appointed time for the ungodly. Indeed, only with difficulty does one die for a just person, though perhaps for a good person one might even find courage to die. But God proves his love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us.

Gospel JN 4:5-42

Jesus came to a town of Samaria called Sychar, near the plot of land that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. Jacob’s well was there. Jesus, tired from his journey, sat down there at the well. It was about noon. A woman of Samaria came to draw water. Jesus said to her, “Give me a drink.” His disciples had gone into the town to buy food. The Samaritan woman said to him, “How can you, a Jew, ask me, a Samaritan woman, for a drink?” —For Jews use nothing in common with Samaritans.— Jesus answered and said to her, “If you knew the gift of God and who is saying to you, ‘Give me a drink,’ you would have asked him and he would have given you living water.” The woman said to him, “Sir, you do not even have a bucket and the cistern is deep; where then can you get this living water? Are you greater than our father Jacob, who gave us this cistern and drank from it himself with his children and his flocks?” Jesus answered and said to her, “Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I shall give will never thirst; the water I shall give will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.” The woman said to him, “Sir, give me this water, so that I may not be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water.” Jesus said to her, “Go call your husband and come back.” The woman answered and said to him, “I do not have a husband.” Jesus answered her, “You are right in saying, ‘I do not have a husband.’ For you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true.” The woman said to him, “Sir, I can see that you are a prophet. Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain; but you people say that the place to worship is in Jerusalem.” Jesus said to her, “Believe me, woman, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You people worship what you do not understand;
we worship what we understand, because salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming, and is now here, when true worshipers will worship the Father in Spirit and truth; and indeed the Father seeks such people to worship him.

God is Spirit, and those who worship him must worship in Spirit and truth.”

The woman said to him, “I know that the Messiah is coming, the one called the Christ; when he comes, he will tell us everything.” Jesus said to her, “I am he, the one speaking with you.”

At that moment his disciples returned, and were amazed that he was talking with a woman, but still no one said, “What are you looking for?” or “Why are you talking with her?”

The woman left her water jar and went into the town and said to the people, “Come see a man who told me everything I have done. Could he possibly be the Christ?”

They went out of the town and came to him. Meanwhile, the disciples urged him, “Rabbi, eat.” But he said to them, “I have food to eat of which you do not know.”

So the disciples said to one another, “Could someone have brought him something to eat?”

Jesus said to them, “My food is to do the will of the one who sent me and to finish his work. Do you not say, ‘In four months the harvest will be here’? I tell you, look up and see the fields ripe for the harvest.

The reaper is already receiving payment and gathering crops for eternal life, so that the sower and reaper can rejoice together. For here the saying is verified that ‘One sows and another reaps.’ I sent you to reap what you have not worked for; others have done the work, and you are sharing the fruits of their work.” Many of the Samaritans of that town began to believe in him because of the word of the woman who testified, “He told me everything I have done.”

When the Samaritans came to him, they invited him to stay with them; and he stayed there two days. Many more began to believe in him because of his word, and they said to the woman, “We no longer believe because of your word; for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the savior of the world.”

**Related Reflections**

If someone were to ask, “What is your image of Jesus?” what would you say? When I think about that question in times of prayer, I invariably come back to this scene of Jesus with this woman. I find something very attractive about a Jesus who is literally exhausted from walking and most likely ministering to the crowds. This is a Jesus who is dusty, perspiring, hungry and thirsty, maybe in need of some personal space from his disciples. This is our God! How close the Christian God is to our own very human experience!

Jesus’ hope of some personal space is shattered by the arrival of the Samaritan woman who comes all alone to draw water from the well. This is curious in itself. Any of you who have ever been to the south of Spain or Italy or North Africa in the height of summer know what it’s like to be out in the midday sun (‘the sixth hour’). ...Why, then, is this Samaritan woman coming to draw water at this unlikely hour? Why is she coming to this particular well when we know from archaeology that Jacob’s well was about half a mile from the town of Sychar and there were other wells much nearer in the town itself? Perhaps I could offer an answer to these puzzling questions. Normally the womenfolk went to the well in groups in the early morning or much later in the afternoon when it was cool – it was a time to chat and catch up on the local gossip.
Was the Samaritan woman making sure that she wouldn’t be noticed if she came at high noon? Was she afraid that the other women might see her and treat her as a social outcast because she had gone through so many husbands? Was she trying to avoid the jeering and cruel remarks of the other women? She must have felt isolated, lonely, ostracized.

And then, the most astonishing thing of all, something we in our culture today might find difficult to appreciate fully: Jesus, a Jewish rabbi or teacher, speaks to a Samaritan woman! Shock! Horror! Jews and Samaritans had been sworn enemies for at least four hundred years. Try to imagine today a Palestinian terrorist and an ultra-orthodox Jew sitting down together for a cozy chat and you have some inkling of how shocking this picture would be to Jesus’ contemporaries.

Jesus then makes this extraordinary request of the Samaritan woman, Give me a drink. The woman is amazed not only at the request but by the very fact that Jesus spoke to her at all. It was unheard of for a rabbi to speak familiarly with a woman in the open. There was a rule which stated, Let no rabbi speak with a woman in public, no, not even with his own wife, or daughters or sisters! If a rabbi did speak to a woman in public, his reputation could be ruined and here is Jesus speaking to a woman of notorious character and begging her, “Give me a drink”.

What an attractive picture of Jesus this is – a very human picture once again. He’s parched with thirst, but perhaps more importantly Jesus has no time for racial prejudices and religious narrow-mindedness – he’s totally free of all that rubbish! He acknowledges the woman as an equal. Jesus is not afraid to show his human need, to beg, even from his country’s sworn enemy. All Jesus sees is the person in front of him, he does not pre-judge or condemn her. The woman is astounded that Jesus accepts her so readily, treats her with honesty, dignity and sensitive respect.

It is precisely because Jesus treats her with such sensitivity that she can be totally honest with him – she can be truly herself without any fear of being pre-judged or condemned. She’s so touched by this that she abandons her water jar (a precious thing in itself at that time in Samaria!) and rushes off to share her amazement and joy with the village. She returns to the very community whom she had sought to avoid. She, a Samaritan, introduces Jesus to other pagans and they believe in him. This most unlikely woman becomes an ambassador of the Good News of Jesus Christ. She is, in fact, the first person in John’s Gospel to call Jesus ‘Lord’. When she asks Jesus if he is the Messiah, Jesus responds EGO EIMI (‘I AM’) – this is not simply saying ‘you’ve got it at last’ but is Jesus making a claim about his divinity.

What might the relevance of this story be for us today? Well, every one of us, no matter how young or old, has a voice within saying, Give me a drink – quench my thirst for acceptance, inclusion, respect, love – don’t pre-judge me on the basis of sheer externals of colour, religion, appearance.

We all wear masks to give the impression that we’re strong, self-sufficient, when we know deep down that we desperately need the acceptance and encouragement of others. The odd word of encouragement, the invitation to include someone, the seemingly insignificant signs of respect for each other can have amazing positive effects – dare I say, they can bring about daily resurrections of hope. We can help each other to encounter Jesus. So, instead of associating Lent with penance (giving up something), why not make this Lent a time of inclusion, of welcoming someone who is or has become a stranger to you?

(Brendan Comerford, https://www.jesuit.ie/spirituality/the-woman-at-the-well/)
The story of the nameless Samaritan woman at the well, recorded only in the Gospel of John, is a revealing one, full of many truths and powerful lessons for us today. It follows on the heels of the account of Jesus’ interaction with Nicodemus, a Pharisee and prominent member of the Jewish Sanhedrin (John 3:1–21). Here we see Jesus’ conversation with a lone Samaritan woman.

This was an extraordinary woman. She was a Samaritan, a race of people that the Jews utterly despised as having no claim on their God, and she was an outcast and looked down upon by her own people. The story of the woman at the well teaches us that God loves us in spite of our bankrupt lives. God values us enough to actively seek us, to welcome us to intimacy, and to rejoice in our worship. As a result of Jesus’ conversation, only a person like the Samaritan woman, an outcast from her own people, could understand what this means. To be wanted, to be cared for when no one, not even herself, could see anything of value in her—this is grace indeed.

- Gotquestions.org

From Sister Christine Schenk – *National Catholic Reporter (from her column, Simply Spirit)*:

Clueless preachers frequently turn today’s Gospel into bad news, especially for women. Rather than highlight the Samaritan woman's inspired missionary leadership, preachers too often rant that she was a five-time divorcee before Jesus saved her from a dissolute life of sin. This is so wrong on so many levels it's hard to know where to begin.

[I like the perspective of] New Testament scholar and Immaculate Heart of Mary Sr. Sandra Schneiders. She points to Israel's use of spousal metaphors to describe God's passionate, covenant love for the chosen people. Samaritans had strayed from monotheism and episodically worshipped other gods. Schneiders suggests that Jesus was speaking metaphorically about Samaria's infidelity -- pointing out that Samaria's current "husband" was not a source of living water for the people.

While scholars have offered numerous interpretations of this puzzling text, there is no real consensus. There are historical contradictions, however, that make taking it at face value a dubious enterprise at best. This is because in first century Palestine, a woman could not initiate divorce except in extremely rare circumstances. Therefore the Samaritan woman's five former husbands must have either divorced her or died. This would have spelled disaster for her since women relied on the patriarchal household to survive. Whatever else she may have been, the Samaritan woman was not a profligate divorcée.

While Jesus at first affirms the woman's reply that she has no husband, he then enigmatically implies that she does have one. But before branding her as a harlot or adulteress, we would be wise to remember that Roman marriage laws stipulated only the freeborn could marry, and then only to another freeborn person. This excluded from legal marriage the millions of freed persons (former slaves) who populated the empire. Living as a concubine could have been the Samaritan woman's only option if she and her "husband" were both freed persons, or if one was freeborn and the other freed.

While we will probably never know the exact circumstances of the Samaritan woman's domestic situation, it is clear that Jesus paid no attention whatsoever to social mores that diminished women.
Biblical scholar Jerome H. Neyrey spells out just how unconcerned John's Gospel is about female propriety: "In John 4, all social taboos customarily separating males and females into separate worlds are systematically recognized, but broken and transformed. This upsetting of cultural taboos, moreover, is conscious and intentional; it constitutes an essential part of the author's communication."

What are the social taboos that are "broken and transformed" by the text? First, a solitary Samaritan woman approaches Jesus at a public well at the wrong time of day. Since village women normally drew water only at dawn and dusk, a woman appearing alone at noon would have been considered improper. Jesus speaks to her and a lengthy conversation ensues. The woman herself remarks on Jesus' impropriety. Jews disliked and shunned Samaritans and it was considered inappropriate for men to speak to women outside their kinship circles in public. But Jesus is not deterred.

And the woman exhibits remarkable theological acumen sparring with Jesus over where true worship is found. Unlike the respected rabbi, Nicodemus (John 3), who meets secretly with Jesus at night and departs still doubting, the Samaritan woman meets him in broad daylight and departs a true believer. John's Gospel portrays her as the privileged recipient of Jesus' self-revelation as "Messiah" and the great "I Am" hearkening back to Moses pointing to Jesus' oneness with the divine. On her word, "Many of the Samaritans of that town began to believe in him ..." (John 4:39).

This text is the longest conversation Jesus has with any woman in all four Gospels. Many scholars believe a female missionary probably evangelized Samaria and there were many Samaritan members in the diverse community for whom John's Gospel was written.

For John, the Samaritan woman represents the consummate "outsider" who, after her transformative encounter with Jesus, becomes not only an "insider" but also a leader, publicly proclaiming Jesus the Messiah to both men and women via village communication channels. Along the way the narrative deliberately highlights and then discounts stereotypical female behaviors to which she does not conform. Yet her non-conformity presents no obstacle to her acceptance and subsequent leadership in Jesus' kinship network.

For me, the most compelling piece of "good news" in this passage is that the Samaritan woman's search for true worship comes to fruition in her lengthy dialogue with Jesus. In the encounter not only is she changed, but so is Jesus. Her joyful embrace of Jesus' teaching slakes his hunger to fulfill God's will "on earth as in heaven." "I have food to eat that you don't know about," says a re-energized Jesus, rejoicing that God's harvest is indeed vast (John 4:32-38).

The woman's search for true worship "in Spirit and in Truth" is at last fulfilled. Jesus recognizes that he did not sow the hunger for God that already existed within her. But he did reap what another had sown. As for the Samaritan woman, she now joins a group of sowers and reapers "gathering crops for eternal life" (John 4:36).

And what about us? Where do we find true worship? Where do we gather crops for eternal life?
Dwell
as near as possible
to the channel in which your life flows. – Henry David Thoreau

Meditation Suggestion (From Loyola Press - by Andy Alexander, SJ, Maureen McCann Waldron)

Spend 5-10 minutes in silence as you reflect on these questions. Write down some thoughts if you’d like. Then, share a few of your thoughts with the group if you are willing.

Think about the Samaritan woman coming to draw water at noon, the hottest time of the day.

What are the places in my life where I am embarrassed, where I avoid interaction with others?

What are the noonday wells of my life?

Imagine yourself as the woman in this passage. Jesus approaches you and tries to reveal his thirst to you—perhaps his thirst for intimacy with you—but you put him off. You are not worthy. It won’t work. When he offers to satisfy your thirst, you put him off. You are convinced he can’t satisfy your needs, at least not at this well and without a bucket.

Reflect: How do I put Jesus off, with excuses, problems, or barriers? Examples might include saying, “I don’t have time,” “I haven’t done this before,” “My stuff is too complicated,” or “I don’t know how to find you in this mess.”

When Jesus shows the woman that he knows her, she comes to understand she is in the presence of someone special—perhaps the One she has thirsted for all her life.

Do I let Jesus show me that he knows and understands me?

The grace will come when I see that I have been at the well a long time and have long been thirsty. When I can name the new thirst, the Water that now satisfies that thirst, I can overcome my remaining resistance to trust. When I see that Jesus reveals himself to me by revealing me to myself, thereby showing me my need for him as Savior, I will rejoice and tell the whole world, too.

For the coming week: Consider asking God for the grace to become living water for others.
Discussion Questions

Jesus knows the story of this woman he meets at the well. But he seems to want her to talk about her situation with him. Why do you think this is? How does it affect her?

Have there been times when you felt you were hiding parts of yourself, but found them to be freed after talking them over with God? Perhaps in Reconciliation?

Discuss the significance of water (the uses, benefits, dangers, characteristics, etc.). Where do we see water as a symbol in our worship and prayer? In what other places and ways do we see it mentioned in Scripture? Why is water so powerful and important in connection with God?

Prayer

Take, O take me as I am;
Summon out what I shall be;
Set Your seal upon my heart and live in me.

—Refrain of Take, O Take Me As I Am by John L. Bell, © 1995 Wild Goose Resource Group, Iona Community

Music Ideas:

As the Deer Longs – Psalm 42/43 – Bob Hurd
As Water to the Thirsty – David Haas
River of Grace – Christy Nockels