

CEC 3 Lent, Year A: 27 March 2011

The Holy Gospel of our savior Jesus Christ according to John.

Last week's gospel gave us Jesus' encounter with Nicodemus, a leader of the Jewish people who believed good things about Jesus but, at that time at least, wasn't able to move to a point of belief in Jesus.

Today we look at another famous encounter, this time between Jesus and a woman with a past!

The Pharisees heard that Jesus was gaining and baptizing more disciples than John, although in fact it was not Jesus who baptized, but his disciples. When the Lord learned of this, he left Judea and went back once more to Galilee. Now he had to go through Samaria. So he came to a town in Samaria called Sychar, near the plot of ground Jacob had given to his son Joseph. Jacob had dug a well on this spot, and Jesus, tired as he was from the journey, sat down by the well. It was about the sixth hour.

Now before we go any further there are some things to explain, which John's original readers would have got straight away, but which to us are less obvious.

Samaria is a region of Israel in the north of the country.

It became the capital of the Northern Kingdom after the split in Israel following the death of King Solomon.

This Kingdom was later invaded by the Assyrians, who intermarried with the Jews of the area.

This made the Samaritans racially mixed and impure by critical standards.

In addition, instead of worshipping in Jerusalem at the Temple they worshipped on their own mountain.

Righteous Jewish people looked down upon them, but Jesus didn't seem to care.

When a Samaritan woman came to draw water, Jesus said to her, "Will you give me a drink?" (His disciples had gone into the town to buy food.)

There are several striking things in this encounter.

First, the woman was drawing water at the well in the middle of the day - why?

The women typically went to draw water at the start and end of the day – so that they weren't carrying heavy loads of water in the heat.

Yet this woman comes to the well in the middle of the day.

I think she wanted to be alone.

We know from a little later on that she had a troubled relationship history and she probably didn't want to listen to the gossip of the other women – especially when she was part of the gossip!

Then Jesus does a strange thing: He speaks to her asking her for a drink.

Now this broke two huge social taboos.

First, as I've said, good Jews did not speak to Samaritans at all.

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However, the bigger taboo was that he, a man, spoke to a woman who was not a relative, and when they were alone. This is unheard of and could compromise them both. It also didn't help that the well where they met was also the place where Isaac, Jacob and Moses all met the women who became their wives. So it was a place of romantic allusion to both Jews and Samaritans. This just adds a certain tension to the scene as Jesus speaks to this woman without any witnesses. Anything could happen. The woman, however, has her wits about her:

The Samaritan woman said to him, "You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?" (For Jews do not associate with Samaritans.)

The woman starts to point out the distance between them: "You are Jew and I am a Samaritan woman." She is reminding Jesus of the social order. She must have been fearful for her own safety and reputation. What if this strange man had attacked or abused her - who would believe her? She had come to get the water in the middle of the day to avoid gossip, now here she was speaking to a man alone, this would give the gossips something to really talk about!

Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water." "Sir," the woman said, "you have nothing to draw with and the well is deep. Where can you get this living water? Are you greater than our father Jacob, who gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did also his sons and his flocks and herds?"

Jesus turns the tables a bit and from initially asking her for water, now he is offering her water, but living water from God. This intrigues the woman who now addresses him more politely as "Sir" rather than "you..a Jew". But she also reminds him of her heritage and notes that this was Jacob's well. She is not going to let Jesus think that her faith was less good than the Jewish faith, and reminds Jesus of her ancestry: if it is Jacob's well, then she is a daughter of Abraham. No matter how compromised she may be, this is a woman with some spirit.

Jesus answered, "Nevertheless, everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give will become a spring of water welling up to eternal life."

Jesus now gets to the heart of his message. The water that comes from the well is good, but eventually we need more. We will thirst again, as ordinary water only satisfies for a time. But Jesus is able to give a different type of water, water that springs up to eternal life.

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We don't know if the woman quite gets this,
but she is intrigued by the idea of water that will mean she never thirsts again.

The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water so that I won't get thirsty and have to keep coming here to draw water."

She may have been playing with him - there is a gentle sense of teasing here about not having to keep coming back to draw water.
Clearly Jesus' deep spiritual words haven't yet made the impact they need to, so he changes track:

He told her, "Go, call your husband and come back."

Now this is going to get interesting.....

"I have no husband," she replied. Jesus said to her, "You are right when you say you have no husband. The fact is, you have had five husbands, and the man you now have is not your husband. What you have just said is quite true."

This exchange must have shaken the woman.
In Jewish law women could only remarry twice.
We don't know the circumstances here, but it is interesting to note that Jesus' reply contains neither judgment nor indication that he considers her particularly sinful.
Rather than condemn her for her past, Jesus commends her (albeit ironically) for telling the possibly inconvenient truth.

"Sir," the woman said, "I can see that you are a prophet. Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, but you Jews claim that the place where we must worship is in Jerusalem."

Jesus knowledge of her precipitates another step toward her recognition of him, and she tells Jesus who he is ("I see that you are a prophet").
Then she starts to talk more deeply about theology – looking at the differences about where to worship God between the Jews and the Samaritans.
She has opened up deeply to Jesus now.

Jesus declared, "Believe me, woman, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. For the time has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth."

Jesus shows that where people worship is not important, what is important is that we worship honestly and spiritually.
The external things about worship are not as important as our own interior attitudes.

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It doesn't matter if we worship in a church or a social hall, so long as we have the right attitude when we come to worship. Having just commended her for her personal honesty, now Jesus tells the Samaritan woman, and us, that we have to be honest when we worship for worship in Spirit and in truth is what God wants. His words seem to have an effect on the woman.

The woman said, "I know that Messiah" (called Christ) "is coming. When he comes, he will explain everything to us."

It's a reasonable answer and tries to unite them on something they both believe in. Of course Jesus' answer startles her:

Then Jesus declared, "I am he who speak to you."

We don't know what her immediate response was, but clearly she must have been startled to hear Jesus using the "I am" formula, putting her in mind of the Jewish name for God passed down from Moses: "I am who I am."

Just then the disciples returned and were surprised to find Jesus talking with a woman. But no one asked, "What do you want?" or "Why are you talking with her?" Then, leaving her water jar, the woman went back to the town and said to the people, "Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did. Could this be the Christ?" They came out of the town and made their way toward him.

The encounter with Jesus has really affected her. She is wondering if this prophet is, indeed, the Christ. She doesn't yet believe, but she is coming to that place of belief and is telling her friends. She has clearly taken that leap of faith that Nicodemus couldn't quite manage. Indeed, it is almost like the call stories of the other gospels: leaving behind her water jar, the woman becomes an apostle, a "sent one," who goes to tell others the good news. As we read on, it becomes clear that her efforts in evangelism succeed:

Many of the Samaritans from that town believed in him because of the woman's testimony, "He told me everything I ever did." So when the Samaritans came to him, they urged him to stay with them, and he stayed two days. And because of his words many more became believers. They said to the woman, "We no longer believe just because of what you said; now we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this man really is the Savior of the world."

The Samaritan woman's transformation, made complete in her act of witness, reveals a faith strong enough to risk ridicule and anger from her community even though she is not entirely certain about the man she drags them out to see.

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Her story holds the promise of growth and freedom,
even for those whose oppression is deeply internalized.
In the midst of highly symbolic language-spirit and truth,
temple and mountain, Samaritan and Jew-
the woman emerges as a subject in her own right,
rather than merely a reflection of what her culture and the disciples expect her to be.

As we tell this story, we admire Jesus' example
as a wise teacher who challenges and provokes,
but neither shames the woman for her past
nor ridicules her for requiring time to come to her own understanding of who he is.
He addresses her past in order that an honest relationship might develop,
removing it as a possible source of shame
that might prevent her from moving toward him.
And he urges the woman toward a deeper understanding so that, eventually,
she will believe of her own volition and gradually release her mistrust
in the face of what must seem too welcoming to be genuine.

As Jesus interacted with the Samaritan woman, so he interacts with us.
He draws us in, knows all about our pasts and doesn't mind about them.
He knows the partial nature of our faith and still offers us living water,
a fuller, more complete understanding of what we are called to believe.
May we too find transformative strength in our encounter with the Christ,
faith daring enough to witness even in the face of an uncomprehending world.

The Gospel of the Lord.

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