

Although we spoke about this on the 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Lent, there is so much in this Gospel, especially for the season of Lent, that I think it is worth revisiting.

Jesus and His Apostles were travelling from Judea (southern Israel) to Galilee (northern) Israel. Samaria was more less in central Israel so Jesus and the Apostles passed by Samaria on the way to Galilee. Samaria lies within Israel. Why would there be (what seems to be) a non-Israelite territory within Israel? The way this came about, the way the Samaritans came about, is that around 700 BC, the Gentile country, Assyria, conquered the territory of Israel north of Judea. Some of the Israelites then intermixed with the Assyrians and these became the Samaritans. Samaritans were despised by the Israelites; they were considered traitors, not pure Jews, and they had developed their own place of sacrifice (temple). The contempt was mutual. This background helps, for one thing, to understand some of the things the Samaritan woman said; for example, she refers to Jacob as “our father” because the Samaritans were half-Hebrew.

Now for our Lord’s encounter with this Samaritan woman. The Apostles had gone to town to buy supplies and our Lord was resting at this well – Jacob’s well. Notice the time and place of this meeting. The woman came to the well at noon; John specifically mentions the time. Why? Bishop Sheen said it is an indication that she had been ostracized by the other women. Just imagine if you had to draw and carry by hand all of the water you use from a well outside of town. It was hard work and women usually did it. However, Bishop Sheen said, they would usually come to the well either early in the morning or in the evening so as to avoid the heat of the day. So this woman, coming in the heat of the day, is an indication that she’d been chased away by the other women. She was an outcast even among outcasts; she was the lowest of the lowly, and yet, amongst so many people who encountered our Lord, it is she who really receives Him. I cannot receive the Lord perched on a man-made or self-made throne. Such things cut me off definitively.

Now the place of this meeting – a well. The Apostles were amazed when they got back and saw our Lord talking to a woman? Our Lord spoke frequently to women so why are they amazed now? It is because a man and a woman at a well was taken, by Jews at the time, as an indication of an upcoming marriage. Isaac, Jacob, and Moses, for example, all met their wives at a well. This is an important part of the teaching, a sign, in this Gospel passage. It is intended to show the end-point that our Lord intends, “where” or to what Jesus wants to bring this woman. A wedding is a thing of great joy and celebration. So whatever else occurs here, the destination is to a “wedding banquet,” celebration and happiness. The Lord first our Lord does, so as to bring about union with Him is bring this happy destination to mind.

The exchange begins. Jesus asks her for a drink. Notice again how our Lord interacts with us: He makes Himself available, He calls, and then leaves room for (waits for) us to respond. If we don’t respond, nothing happens, nothing good comes about. He makes Himself available especially in the sacraments, in a premier way in the Eucharist. Our Lord is available to us 24 hours a day, every day of the year except during the Triduum. He sits there and waits, making Himself available, waiting for us to respond. While the Eucharist is the summit of our Lord’s presence here on earth, sincere reception of the other sacraments steps to reach the summit. One of these will especially come out in this exchange between our Lord and the Samaritan woman.

The woman responds to our Lord’s request with shock: “how can you, a Jew, ask me a Samaritan for a drink.” She says to Him that He doesn’t even have a bucket – Jews wouldn’t even use utensils in common with Samaritans. Notice two things. On the one hand, the woman does not immediately accept our Lord or fulfill His request. At the same time, she does make a response. What happens if she just turns up her nose, turns her back on Him, ignores Him? Nothing, nothing good, she remains an outcast.

Now notice again how things proceed. It is so easy to pass by our Lord precisely because, as He says to the Samaritan woman, we don’t know Who is speaking to us in our interior. The woman does respond, very hesitantly, but responds nonetheless. So the Lord takes another step and makes an offer, speaking to her in terms she can understand. What is a principle or characteristic of Scripture brought out by the good teachers of the faith? God condescends to man to speak to man in terms in he can understand. He says to her: if you knew

who it was who asked you for a drink, you would have asked Him and He would have given you living water. He is using material things (which He created) to help her understand higher spiritual realities and what it is that He is offering. But the main point is this: He is first opening her eyes, her mind, to the goodness of God, to the great love of God, that He wants to fulfill our deepest desire (the one for happiness) and only He can do it. Our Lord is saying to us, then: do you want your inescapable thirst for happiness to be fulfilled? This is the starting point – to think about the goodness of God, the love of God, but not just in some matter-of-fact way but rather in a way that strikes us to the core. There is nothing like meditation on Passion of our Lord that helps to bring this about; yet, week after week most people pass this by, even during Lent.

Now our Lord has captured her full attention and as a result, she has responded enough to allow our Lord the opportunity to continue. I should stop and ask myself: has this ever happened to me? She is low and weary, she realizes her misery and says: yes, give me this water. She does not yet fully realize what He is talking about, that He is using material things to talk about the true source of happiness – the immaterial things from God. And, she trusts Him enough, she hopes enough, she believes enough to ask Him for this living water. Again, has this ever happened to me? Have I ever stopped to “listen” long enough, have I ever sought a little so as to allow this sort of exchange between and me and the Lord? Long enough to realize, deeply and thoroughly, the goodness of God, so much so that I now desire to have it, willing to endure whatever comes in order to receive it? As we will see that willingness to endure will be necessary in order to receive the “living water.”

So once again, she responds; she says: give me this living water. She does not fully understand what she is saying, she does not yet really realize that our Lord is using material things to speak of the infinitely greater spiritual (immaterial) good He wishes to bestow on what is about to become His daughter. Nonetheless, she believes Him and her response is enough, allowing our Lord to proceed with her request.

**Here is the critical part of this exchange** between our Lord and the Samaritan woman, the turning point, especially as it pertains to this great season of Lent. Our Lord’s response might seem odd, out of place, unrelated to her response; but of course we will see that is not the case. She said: give me this living water and our Lord immediately proceeds to do just that, but He does it by saying: go bring your husband. What? Why this? Why is this our Lord’s next step in giving her what she has asked for? In fact, it’s not at all difficult to see. Jesus wants to give her what she has asked for so He proceeds by trying to remove the obstacle that is in the way. It is the first, necessary step; it can’t be skipped. If there’s an impassable barrier (say a wall) between you and your destiny, the wall has to be removed before you can get to your destiny. This is what our Lord is doing with His response: Go call your husband. He is bringing to her mind her sin because that sin is the barrier, the impassable wall, that stands between them; it blocks the way to her receiving the living water that she now desires. As we see, she doesn’t really like looking at this, but she does and she doesn’t deny it. She says: I have no husband. It’s not much of an acknowledgement but it is some and is most definitely not a denial. So our Lord helps her to go further: you are right; you have had 5 husbands and the man you are with now is not your husband. Her silence reflects acceptance and sorrow for this truth. Now she can receive.

Bishop Sheen brings out another critical point with this lady – that there *is* a *progression* to the Lord, not just an immediate arrival. First He is just a Jew (even an enemy), then something like a gentleman (sir), then a prophet, then finally: the Savior of the world. That there is a progression to our Lord, that it’s not once and done, that it’s not: oh I have arrived, is brought out over and over again in both Scripture (e.g., the Apostles, Martha) as well as Sacred Tradition. How often people fail to receive because they assume there is no progression, that they have arrived, and thus refuse to acknowledge sins and enter into real repentance, real sorrow for sin, enough to make us turn from it.

One last thing to notice is that the woman leaves excited; John even goes out of his way to say she left her water jar behind to run back and tell the others, reflecting the excitement she is now experiencing – a small taste of the wedding feast.

*God bless you, Fr Kuhn*