

3rd Sunday of Lent A - St. John, Westminster

Introduction: On Being Thirsty

All of us know what it is to be thirsty. After exercise or physical labor, we welcome a glass of cold water. Even if we're not exerting ourselves, we instinctively drink water through the day. Healthcare professionals tell us about the benefits of drinking water and some urge us to drink six or eight glasses each day.

Let's take this one step further. It's one thing to be thirsty but quite another thing to become dehydrated. Dehydration can affect even our breathing and our heart rate. Often people don't realize they are dehydrated until the symptoms are severe.

My point is not to offer a medical report on the health-benefits of drinking water but rather to help us see what today's Scripture readings have to do with us. After all, in one way or another, all of three readings are about our need for water – the water we need for our bodies and the water we need for our souls.

Water from the Rock

So let us begin with the first reading from the Book of Exodus. The Israelites have just been delivered from the slavery of Egypt. Now, they find themselves in the desert with no water to drink. They quarrel against God, against Moses, and among themselves. At God's command, Moses strikes a rock and out of it water flows, enough for the Israelite people and their livestock.

While we may marvel at the very thought of water flowing from a rock, what we should really ponder is the question the Israelites posed: "Is the Lord in our midst or not?" In other words, is God really present in our lives? And if he is in our midst, does he care about us? Today many people would answer "no" to both questions.

The Woman at the Well

The importance of the Israelites' question is highlighted in Jesus' conversation with the Samaritan woman at the well. She came to Jacob's well looking for the same thing the Israelites sought in the desert; she came to obtain water for herself, her

family, and her livestock. But her thirst for water was but a sign of a deeper thirst, her thirst for God's love. She too wondered if God walked with her and if he cared about her.

When she met Jesus and began to converse with him, all that came out in the open. Jesus could see into her heart and he knew her history. Jesus knew of her multiple marriages; he also told her that she and her people worshipped without understanding. Once Jesus helped the Samaritan woman see herself as she truly was, it was as if her heart, her mind, her soul were opened, such that the waters of divine love could flow through her, cleansing her of sin, giving her the new life of grace, granting her a joy she'd never known.

Even though she was a foreigner with a chequered past, she knew that in Jesus God was indeed with her and that he loved her so much that he forgave even her sins. Ever thereafter she became a believer and a witness to Jesus; through her many came to believe in Him.

The Love of God Poured into Our Hearts

It is St. Paul in our second reading from the Letter to the Romans who helps us see how the experience of the Israelites in the desert *and* the conversation of Jesus with the woman at the well apply to us. Paul answers the Israelites' question in the desert – is God with us or not – by telling us “we have gained access by faith to this grace in which we stand and we boast in hope of the glory of God ... ” St. Paul tells us that by faith in Jesus, who died and rose to save us, we live in the hope that we will share in the glory of God. This means that we will someday become more beautiful than we can now imagine because we will reflect to the greatest possible degree God's own truth, goodness, beauty, and love.

And how can we dare entertain such an unimaginable hope? St. Paul says it's because “the love of God has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit ... ” *This* is water for which the Israelites thirsted in the desert. *This* is the water which the woman at the well was really seeking. *This* is the water that has irrigated our parched souls since the day of our Baptism, ‘the love of God poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit ... ”

Perhaps just a bit of water in a baptismal shell was used for our baptisms.

Nevertheless, Jesus tells us that the water he has given us is “a spring of water welling up to eternal life ... ” Yet many people regard their baptism as an empty ritual that has little or nothing to do with how they lead their lives. But how do we get to that point? And how are the waters of Baptism revived in us?

It is quite possible that after having had the love of God poured into our hearts, we have, as it were, close off the valve through sin and spiritual laziness. Through sin we deprive ourselves of the living water of Father’s love, revealed by Jesus on the Cross and given to us in the power of Holy Spirit. When we deprive ourselves in less serious ways for shorter periods of time we may grow spiritually thirsty. But when we deprive ourselves in more serious ways for longer periods of time, then we may become spiritually dehydrated. Then it is that our fundamental relationship of love with God and the Church fails. Thankfully, the Lord, in his mercy, has given us a sacrament by which we can be “re-hydrated”, namely, the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

The Sacrament of Reconciliation

Not long ago Pope Francis spoke about the Sacrament of Confession. He asked: “When was the last time you made your confession? Everyone think about it ... Two days, two weeks, two years, twenty years, forty years? ... And if much time has passed do not lose another day. Jesus is there ... Jesus receives you; he receives you with so much love. Be courageous and go to confession ... ”

In the same address the Pope tells us why we need to go to confession. “Forgiveness,” he says, “is not the fruit of our own efforts but rather a gift, it is a gift of the Holy Spirit who fills us with the wellspring of mercy and of grace that flows unceasingly from the open heart of the Crucified and Risen Christ ... ” In a word, the Sacrament of Reconciliation revives the waters of Baptism, making them indeed “a spring of water welling up to eternal life.”

Just as the woman at the well rejoiced because Jesus knew her, so let us rejoice to make an thorough unburdening confession of our sins. By receiving at the hands of the priest absolution, the forgiveness of our sins, the waters of baptism once again flow freely so as irrigate our souls, making them, as Malcom Muggeridge famously said, “something beautiful for God.” When that happens, we too will become Jesus’

witnesses, his credible witnesses, before the Church and the world.

May God bless us and keep us always in his love!