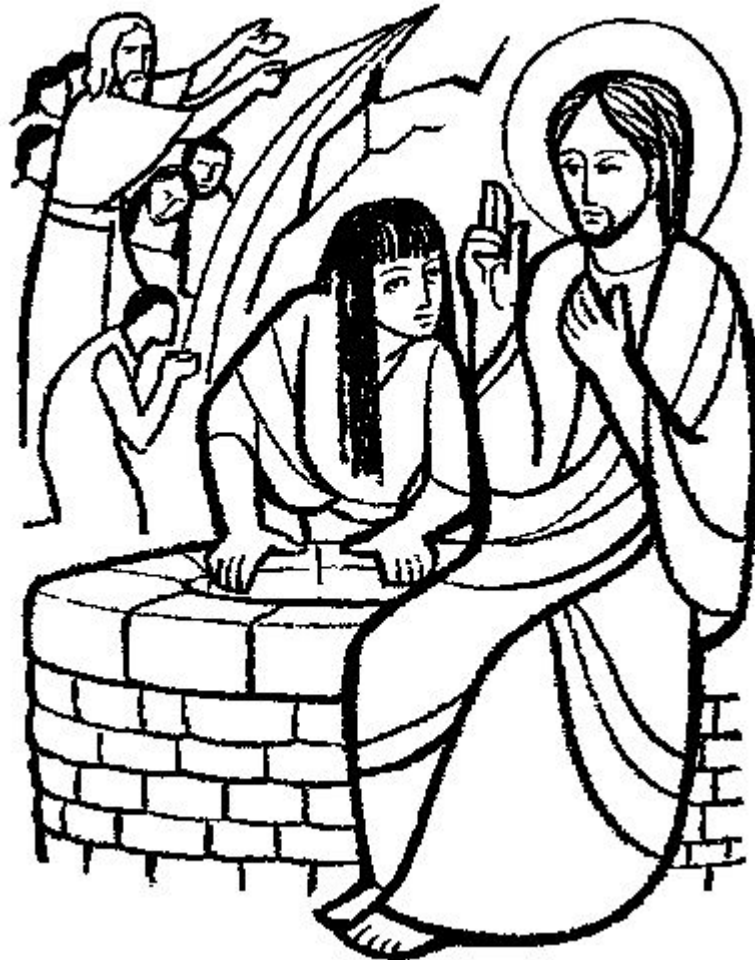


the Sunday Readings



The woman said to him, "I know that Messiah is coming" (who is called Christ). "When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us." Jesus said to her, "I am he, the one who is speaking to you."

(John 4 : 25 – 26)

3rd SUNDAY OF LENT (a)

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*living water at Jacob's Well*¹

introduction

Jesus' mission goes beyond the confines of the Israelites and the ideas and prejudices of his day. Today's gospel reading from John reveals an important facet of Jesus' mission, that *'The Water'* he is offering will quench the human thirst for fullness of life. Jesus speaks of *'the power of the Spirit'*. The Father must be worshipped *'in spirit and truth'*. The worship at stake reaches far beyond the worship of Jews and Samaritans. It is addressed to a GOD who is close and loving – a Father.

first reading: Exodus 17:3-7²

[water from the rock]

But the people thirsted there for water; and the people complained against Moses and said, "Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?"(3) So Moses cried out to the LORD, "What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me."(4) The LORD said to Moses, "Go on ahead of the people, and take some of the elders of Israel with you; take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go.(5) I will be standing there in front of you on the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it, so that the people may drink." Moses did so, in the sight of the elders of Israel.(6) He called the place, Massah and Meribah, because the Israelites quarrelled and tested the LORD, saying, "Is the LORD among us or not?"(7)

After withdrawing from the Egyptian slave labour system the Israelites experience the hardship of the wilderness. In a waterless land that doesn't sustain life, they begin to doubt the LORD GOD's faithfulness to the promise of a better life. In quarrelsome distrust of Moses' leadership they look towards a return to the guaranteed food and water supplies of 'safe slavery' in Egypt.³ The peoples' outcry and the response of the WORD of the LORD GOD through Moses, proves that GOD is not a presence to assure continuity of their old history.

The LORD works a newness out of disruptions and disorientations of the journey to liberation. The account affirms that it is in GOD's power not to let those die who would live in hope. Those who trust in the promised new future, will not be abandoned. Though they have no resources to manage they do have the covenant gifts of quail, manna and

1 Cover Image: 3rd Sunday Ordinary Time from the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart, Peru.

2 The biblical excerpts are drawn from the New Oxford Annotated Bible, New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), published by Oxford University Press (1994).

3 [v.7] *'Massah . . . Meribah'* – words in Hebrew that meant respectively, *'the (place of the) test'*, and *'the (place of the) quarrelling'*. Like people in every crisis of faith the people have two options. The first, is to blame their leader and go back to their old history. Or, they can trust and be prepared to risk the new history that is opening up to them. They have reason to believe the latter option because *Exodus* ch.16 describes gifted landlessness; of surprising manna being given and received. In light of this the wilderness is discerned as a place of surprising and unexpected resources.

water! The gifts are given at the very time that the people know they are totally vulnerable.

response: Psalm 95 : 1 – 2, 6 – 9

[a call to worship and obedience]

*O come, let us sing to the LORD;
let us make a joyful noise
to the rock of our salvation!(1)
Let us come into his presence with thanksgiving;
let us make a joyful noise to him with songs of praise!(2) . . .
O come, let us worship and bow down,
let us kneel before the LORD, our Maker!(6)
For he is our GOD, and we are the people of his pasture,
and the sheep of his hand.
O that today you would listen to his voice!(7)
Do not harden your hearts, as at Meribah,
as on the day at Massah in the wilderness,(8)
when your ancestors tested me, and put me to the proof,
though they had seen my work.(9)*

Hardship and suffering do not turn the Israelites to atheism. Instead they address the throne of the LORD GOD. People of hope have no alternative. Injustice leads them to prayer. The speaker believes that the faithful GOD will be moved to bring about change. Prayer for believers, is not merely a religious activity. It is an act of faith in the way the human community is to be ordered.

These verses are a warning against the neglect of the WORD of GOD. Because of a prophet like Moses, the speaker believes GOD hears the cries of those who are vulnerable; that GOD discerns their true needs. Therefore the speaker is confident that GOD will intervene to bring life and newness to a world where death and hopelessness seem to reign.

second reading: Romans 5 : 1 – 2, 5 – 8

[the results of justification]

Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with GOD through our LORD Jesus Christ,(1) through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of GOD.(2) . . . And hope does not disappoint us, because GOD's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.(5) For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. (6) Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person - though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die.(7) But GOD proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.(8)

Paul suggests that peace with GOD is a present gift and believers look forward in hope of sharing GOD's glory. "Peace with GOD" (v.1) is the condition brought about by Jesus' death. The author affirms that the bonds between GOD and GOD's people are restored. When estrangement ends and a new relationship begins, the Scriptures call this state, 'peace'.

Peace and reconciliation are different metaphors for the same reality. The Greek word for 'peace' and the Hebrew 'shalom', both include the meaning of harmony, wholeness and completeness. In the Scriptures, peace is the condition of the last days. That condition is experienced already by those living in Jesus' way. Believers who overcome alienation and effect reconciliation, experience the peace-making of *the Risen Christ*. It's a foretaste of the peace to come.

Because of the love of GOD poured out through the holy Spirit (v.5) believers are able to rejoice in their hardships. Like the Israelites in the wilderness, the writer believes that sufferings and hardships can lead to life. GOD entered into human experience in the suffering of the Israelites and of Jesus Christ, to give life to a suffering world. In Paul's theology the cross – the suffering of Jesus and of Jesus' disciples – is an expected part of life. A disciple's hope is sustained by the holy Spirit's outpouring of GOD's love.

gospel reading: John 4: 5 – 42

[Jesus and the woman of Samaria]

So he(Jesus) came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph.(5) Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon.(6) A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink."(7) (His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.)(8) The Samaritan woman said to him, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" [Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.](9) Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of GOD, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water."(10) The woman said to him, "Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water?(11) Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?"(12) Jesus said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again,(13) but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life."(14) The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water."(15) Jesus said to her, "Go, call your husband, and come back."(16) The woman answered him, "I have no husband." Jesus said to her, "You are right in saying, 'I have no husband';(17) for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!"(18) The woman said to him, "Sir, I see that you are a prophet.(19) Our ancestors worshipped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem."(20) Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem.(21) You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews.(22) But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshippers will

worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him.(23) GOD is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth."(24) The woman said to him, "I know that Messiah is coming" (who is called Christ). "When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us."(25) Jesus said to her, "I am he, the one who is speaking to you."(26) Just then his disciples came. They were astonished that he was speaking with a woman, but no one said, "What do you want?" or, "Why are you speaking with her?"(27) Then the woman left her water jar and went back to the city. She said to the people,(28) "Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?"(29) They left the city and were on their way to him.(30) Meanwhile the disciples were urging him, "Rabbi, eat something."(31) But he said to them, "I have food to eat that you do not know about."(32) So the disciples said to one another, "Surely no one has brought him something to eat?"(33) Jesus said to them, "My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work.(34) Do you not say, 'Four months more, then comes the harvest'? But I tell you, look around you, and see how the fields are ripe for harvesting.(35) The reaper is already receiving wages and is gathering fruit for eternal life, so that sower and reaper may rejoice together.(36) For here the saying holds true, 'One sows and another reaps.'(37) I sent you to reap that for which you did not labour. Others have laboured, and you have entered into their labour."(38) Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman's testimony, "He told me everything I have ever done."(39) So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them; and he stayed there two days.(40) And many more believed because of his word.(41) They said to the woman, "It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Saviour of the world."(42)

The narrative describes Jesus' conversation with a Samaritan woman at Jacob's well. The conversation has to do with an alternative way of viewing life. It is unlike anything the woman had known or experienced before. She meets someone who is not intimidated by the natural barriers of race and gender; who treats her as a human being! She hears Jesus speak about a mysterious, *'living water that leads to eternal life'*.

Jesus reveals the details of her personal situation to her – but does not condemn her. He points her to the new, true, worship of GOD. Such worship transcends the location of worship – whether the temple is in Jerusalem, or on Mt. Gerizim.⁴ In the course of the conversation the woman shows a growing understanding of who Jesus is.

At first, Jesus puzzles her as he probes beyond the conventional barriers to ask for a drink. Not only does Jesus persist with his probing, but she persists in probing back, when she asks for *'living water'*. When Jesus points out her personal

4 Mt. Gerizim – where the Samaritans had their own temple

situation, she doesn't dismiss him as a meddler but acknowledges that that he is a prophet. Then she probes further, to ask about the proper place to worship and brings up the issue of *the messiah*. Eventually she tells others the story of this conversation (v.29) and arouses the curiosity of the Samaritans at Sychar that leads to their surprising admission about Jesus (v.42).⁵

John's gospel gives us a symbol with the Samaritan woman. The prophets had spoken of the idolatries of Samaria, as prostitution. They describe it as a wife who has forgotten her first husband, the LORD GOD, and who goes in pursuit of other lovers (idols). Isaiah has also prophesied that Israel would no longer be called "*husband-less*." In John's gospel the Baptist says Jesus is the "*bridegroom*".⁶ Such imagery can't be loaded on to this particular Samaritan woman, but casual divorce practices betray male tendencies to go after other lovers.

The woman acknowledges that Jesus is a prophet (v.19). The prophets were the ones who denounce injustices, idolatry, or prostitution, in Israel. This is no longer a person with a problem in her private life. The Samaritan woman has now become Samaria, who has recognised in Jesus the voice of the prophets. The Israelites had been saying that it was necessary to adore GOD in the Temple at Jerusalem. The Samaritans were claiming it was on their hill where there was a rival temple. The woman asks which of the two religions was true. Jesus said: "*Believe Me, woman, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father, neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem*" (v.21).⁷

Jesus has seen John the Baptist's fate. He is on the run from Judea and now passing through Samaria. It's an Israelite-style freedom (salvation) that he is fleeing from. '*Is coming*' – '*is already here*' expresses a change; a process (vv.22-23). The idea of evolution didn't yet exist. There were no words to express that concept. Instead the passage describes something that, '*already exists*' and yet '*doesn't yet exist*'.

Jesus continues: "*GOD is Spirit, and those who worship must worship in spirit and truth*" (v.24). The woman said to him, "*I know that the messiah – that is, Christ – is coming; and when he comes he will explain everything*" (v.25). Jesus said, "*That is who I am, I who speak to you*" (v.26). '*Spirit*' for an Israelite meant '*the breath of*

5 Maybe she still thinks in terms of physical water and regarded Jesus as a kind of wonder-worker who could save her from the task of carrying water. Samaritans believed in a mixture of pagan religions. Like many today, they had a magic-mentality! In the past it has been women's lot to be fetchers of water. Jesus came to address social questions. We cannot talk on about love, if people remain burdened and enslaved. In Samaria today, they may have water piped from the well. That doesn't mean that slavery is ended. Slavery exists under a new guise whenever poor people have to pay an exorbitant price for the necessities of life.

6 Jn.3:29

7 The first Christians had no temples. '*Church*' in Greek is a secular word that means, '*meeting*'. The Israelite Scriptures hardly ever use religious words – only ordinary words that later took on religious meaning. In the Christian Scriptures, when religious words are used, it is to give them back their secular sense (for example – when Paul says, '*the temple is people*'. Jesus says neither of the two religions are going to be needed. But he doesn't talk about a new religion.

life'. GOD is the One who instills life. That *life* or *spirit* is *Love*. It's the same as saying that Love is among us. The Samaritan woman recognises that love in Jesus – and she tells everyone.

for sharing:⁸

- *Unless we see ourselves as personally present in the Exodus experience our Christian faith will not be real. Comment on Exodus 17 : 3 - 7.*
- *The Eucharist expresses the reality that GOD loves us; that Jesus died for us, while we were still sinners. Comment on Romans 5 : 1 - 2, 5 - 8*
- *Jesus broke through religious, social and sexual discriminations when he spoke to the Samaritan woman in the way he did. Share about those features of our society that thirst for the justice and reconciliation that only Jesus' spirit can bring. Comment on John chapter 4 : 5 - 42*

prayer:⁹

*O GOD, living and true, look upon Your people,
whose dry and stony hearts are parched with thirst.
Unseal the living water of Your Spirit;
let it become within us an ever-flowing spring,
leaping up to eternal life.
Thus may we worship You in spirit and in truth
through Christ, our deliverance and hope,
who lives and reigns with You in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
holy and mighty GOD, now and always. **Amen.***

8 Lectio Divina: reading GOD'S WORD in a moment of prayer and allowing it to enlighten and renew us: The practise of *lectio divina* requires a quiet space, a passage of scripture and the willingness to give time to the project. The passage used should be short. For the purpose of this leaflet, we suggest using the gospel reading of the up-coming Sunday. There are four steps in the traditional practise of *lectio divina*. The steps don't have to have the following order: *lectio* (*reading*) – read the passage of Scripture read slowly - more than once. If a particular word, phrase, or sentence seems significant (even if you don't know why) you may want to write it down. *meditatio* (*reflection*) – let the significant words fill your mind without straining to analyse them. We are in GOD'S presence and so let the Holy Spirit lead your understanding of the words. *oratio* (*prayer*) – allow your heart to speak to GOD, in words inspired by the passage of Scripture, or by the thoughts that have come to you, while reflecting on it. *contemplatio* (*rest*) – let go of ideas and words and allow yourself to rest in the presence of GOD, in simple and wordless contemplation. This leaflet gives the context and some commentary on each of the readings and the psalm used in the Sunday's liturgy. Familiarity with the texts and the commentary beforehand, can better prepare our hearing and understanding the passages in our worship. Whatever our preparation for doing this exercise and whatever questions we may use to break open the passage, we must be conscious of Christ's promise: *'Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them'*

9 The prayer that concludes the Lectio Divina is ICEL's 1998 opening prayer from the Proper of the Day. These prayers draw upon the concrete and vivid images of Scripture and conclude with a clearly focused petition inspired by the readings.

review:¹⁰

The WORD of GOD led Moses to act; and water flowed in the desert. Jesus' speech about 'living water that leads to eternal life' and about worship that is freed from the narrow confines of the religious establishment, causes the woman to question her familiar world. This conversation continues for us in the moment of Eucharistic worship. We stand at a threshold between our old faithless, arrogant, self-sufficient ways and the new way of faithfulness demanded of us through Moses, Jesus and the apostle Paul. The moment of worship is a precious moment which we must host with respect and patience. Serious change becomes possible when the visible signs of the invisible reality of GOD's Spirit and Truth are manifested. We come to the Eucharist with the strange expectation that being subverted by GOD's Spirit and filled with GOD's Truth, we will be liberated by the Bread of Life and the Cup of Salvation.

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¹⁰ The review – at the end of each reflection the review examines one of the themes of the readings, usually drawn from the gospel, and provides an opportunity to check our own performance, in the light of the WORD and Eucharist that we have previously heard and experienced.