

3rd Sunday Lent "A"

March 22-23, 2014

"I am he, the one speaking with you."

Readings: Exodus 17:3-7; Romans 5:1-2,5-8; John 4:5-42

People who drive for a living, whether in sales or shipping, always know the best rest stops. If you are driving south to Iowa, you are best off waiting until just after you cross the border and exit at the first opportunity. What awaits you is a clean, attractive Red Barn complete with maps, information, a guest sign-in book, fresh coffee and even home made pie! In many ways it is a throwback, but I never fail to stop there if passing through, if only to thank them for their "down home" approach.

Because of that atmosphere, it is so easy to engage in friendly conversation with complete strangers, as they too sip a cup of coffee or browse the literature racks. It is an inviting atmosphere located at a bit of a crossroads between two states, that despite all the jokes, actually get along pretty well!

When Jesus met the woman at the well in today's Gospel, the scene was that of Jacob's well. The usual route from Judea to Galilee lay through Samaria and took on average about three days. But the Jews for the most part avoided traveling through Samaria. They had been at enmity with the Samaritans for centuries. In around 400BC the Samaritans built a temple on Mount Gerizim, causing tension and hostility between the Jews and the Samaritans. The Samaritans were seen as an impure and mixed breed.

For Jesus to pass through Samaria in itself was unusual- but to stop to engage a woman in conversation was practically unheard of in his day. The well of Jacob lay at a major fork in the road, one branch turning West to Samaria and western Galilee, the other going NE towards the Lake of Genessaret.¹ Today, it is situated in the West Bank near Nablus, and so it is more difficult to access. But it is there today and is nearly 80 feet deep. In any case, it was truly a crossroads, both geographically and religiously. It was a perfect place for such an amazing encounter.

¹ "Gospel of John" New Jerome Biblical Commentary, page 956. Genessaret = Sea of Galilee.

The Gospel notes that Jesus stopped there to rest, tired from his journey. In his commentary on this Gospel, St. Thomas Aquinas notes: “Jesus reveals his weakness (even though his power was unlimited), not because of a lack of power, but to show us the reality of the [human] nature he assumed...Seeing Jesus becoming tired from his journey is an example to us not to shrink from our work for the salvation of others”²

Then, Jesus asks the woman for a drink of water– and she can hardly believe her ears. As St. Augustine noted of the Samaritans and Jews: “The Jews would not even use their vessels. So it would astonish the woman to hear a Jew ask to drink out of her vessel; a thing so contrary to Jewish rule.”³ And why did she come at Noon, in the midst of the heat of the day? Was she hoping to be anonymous and avoid interaction? Many questions are raised in this passage. But by far, the most amazing aspect of this account is how Jesus uses the Samaritan woman for an all-important lesson about evangelization.

First, the Lord meets people where they are. This was a crossroads, and it was the perfect place to make a key point about the universality of the mission of Jesus to proclaim to all the nations. Secondly, it shows forth the power of believers when they become convinced of the truth of Jesus.

Despite all the history of poor relations between Jews and Samaritans, the gesture of openness that Jesus showed was returned with an amazing and perceptive movement towards wanting to be one who spreads the Good News. See how quickly she moved from questioning his motives to forwarding his mission. She was convinced and did not delay to become a zealous disciple. She did not sit back and wait but seized the moment. In this she was like the Ethiopian eunuch whom we meet in Acts of the Apostles who asks to be baptized on the spot!

² Thomas Aquinas, Commentary on Gospel of St. John, Chapter 4, lecture 1, para. #563-64

³ St. Augustine, Commentary on John, quoted in Catena Aurea, chapter 4, lectio 2

When the light goes on, it goes on quickly, and she never looks back. The message of Jesus is for all of the world, not for a select few. She says she knows that the Messiah is coming and Jesus rewards her insight by clearly identifying himself. "I am he, the one who is speaking with you." This is a clear and unequivocal admission of the mission of Jesus

Jesus Christ is the life giving water-he, and he alone will provide the life giving nourishment we need. He points the way to heaven; he always invites, he will never stop the invitation or rescind it, unless we reject him. We have the guidance of the Church, and we must pray to see it as the surest sign of God's continuing presence. The Church can indeed be our roadmap, clearly drawn, offering us guidance.

Let us pray for the Church, that she will always be the sign of the kingdom, and a clear sign for all to see. The Church must continue to lead us to the life-giving water of Jesus Christ. So many hunger and thirst for meaning in their lives. The Eucharist we are celebrating today is the spiritual food that strengthens us for the journey. We are privileged to receive it and just as privileged to go out to all the crossroads of our lives to encounter others, inviting them to join in the banquet.