

3rd Sunday of Lent, Year A

Jesus said that where two or three are gathered together in his name, he would be there with us (Matthew 18:20). This promise is nowhere fulfilled more intimately than here at the Sunday Eucharist. So let us respond to the invitation of the gospel and sit with Jesus beside the well and hear him promise to give us life. What well do you want to sit beside? Let us think for a moment of the many wells where we have drawn water during our lives. We might think of our family home and all that we drew on from our parents. We could think of the gospels and the many stories about Jesus that we have heard since childhood. Then there are the sacraments of the Church, the example other people have given us, and the prayers that others have prayed for us. We can think of the beautiful people that have come into our lives. All of these in various ways have taught us to dig and have given us the tools to do it. But no well is more important to us than the well of our own heart and the life that we find there.

The Book of Proverbs advises us: 'Watch over your heart, since here are the wellsprings of life'(Proverbs 4:23). And the Wisdom of Ben Sira: 'Heed the counsel of your own heart, for no one is more faithful to you than is your heart. For our own mind sometimes keeps us better informed than seven sentinels sitting high on a watchtower. But above all pray to the Most High that he may direct your way in truth'(Sirach 37:13-15). So let us sit with Jesus at the well of our own heart and hear him promise us, as he promised the woman in the Gospel: 'Drink the water that I shall give you, and you will have a spring inside you, welling up to eternal life.'

Let us begin by noticing how thirsty we are. The woman at the well came to quench her physical thirst and that of her husband and family. Jesus touched a far deeper thirst in her soul – her thirst for the love of God which would be like a spring gushing up from inside her heart and sweeping her into a communion that would go deeper and deeper and never end. This longing is expressed beautifully in the opening words of Psalm 42: 'As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and behold the face of God?'

We are in the midst of Lent, focusing our attention on life as a desert journey in which we constantly experience thirst for love, for meaning, ultimately for communion with God, the 'fountain of life' (Psalm 36:9). This thirst is expressed simply in the opening words of Psalm 63: 'O God, you are my God, I seek you, my soul thirsts for you; my body pines for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water'. The prophet Isaiah assures us: 'With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation'(Isaiah 12:3) – words which Pope Pius XII chose to open his encyclical on the Sacred Heart ('Haurietis Aquas'). Isaiah echoes God's call to each of us: 'Everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labour for that which does not satisfy? Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food. Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live. I will make with you an everlasting covenant'(Isaiah 55:1-3).

Jesus is the bridegroom of the soul, inviting the woman at the well to a covenant of love that alone can satisfy the longings of her heart. The Communion Antiphon, spoken at the most sacred moment of the Mass when the risen Jesus comes to each of us in communion, repeats Jesus' words to her and to us: 'Drink the water that I will give you, and you will have a spring

inside you, welling up to eternal life.’

At the same time, the liturgy today has an important warning for us. We should never take love for granted. It is a beautiful but delicate plant and it must be constantly tended. The Responsorial Psalm is Psalm 95 - the psalm that is prayed at the beginning of the Divine Office every day. It speaks of the joy and the wonder of entering into God’s presence, and the deep gratitude that wells up in our heart when we, like sheep, are welcomed by the Good Shepherd to graze in his presence. Then comes the warning: ‘Listen to his voice!’ ‘Do not let your hearts grow hard!’ We are strange creatures. It is simply a fact that we can take love for granted and we can neglect the relationships that are the deepest ones in our life. It is important to recognise this and Lent is a time for us to examine what is actually coming up out of our heart.

In the First Reading, the people lose faith in God and grumble because they think they are going to be left to die of thirst. When your children or close friends doubt your love and care, it can pierce your heart like a dagger. The rock is a symbol of God, and that is why God tells Moses to strike the rock with his staff. The grumbling of the people strikes at God’s heart. This is the same symbolism which we find in John’s account of the crucifixion. The soldier thrusts a lance into Jesus’ heart. In both scenes, God’s response is love. Water gushes forth from the rock to quench the people’s thirst, and blood and water pour from the heart of Jesus. God loves us and wants nothing more than to be in communion with us. But what is the good of water pouring out from the rock if we have nothing to hold it in? It will be wasted in the desert sand. What is the good of Jesus offering us the water of Baptism and the blood of the Eucharist if we neglect to drink? What is the good of Jesus offering the woman his love if her heart is hard and closed against it? The readings warn us to heed God’s loving invitation and to open our hearts to allow him to soften them and to fill them with his love.

In the Second Reading, Paul reminds us that our hope that one day we will be filled with love is not a deceptive hope: ‘because the love of God has been poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit who is God’s gift to us’(Romans 5:5). So, as we examine our lives this Lent, we will need to face up to and name the ways in which we take love for granted or give in to the distractions that draw our hearts away from love. We do need to do this, so that our repentance and healing will be real. Today’s readings call us to this. But they also remind us of the only context in which such examination of conscience is authentic. When we dare to look into our hearts we will see some beautiful things. We will also see things we are not proud of. That is why it is important to have Jesus sitting beside us. He reminds us that as we are we are loved by his Father. He reminds us, too, that our hearts are temples of God’s Spirit. As he said at the Last Supper: ‘If you love me my Father will love you, and we will come to you and make our home with you’(John 14:23).

Thanks to God’s grace, each of us is capable of receiving and giving love in a unique, wonderful and creative way. We cannot love in exactly the way another person loves however we might admire them and however close we feel to them. Each of us has to find his or her own unique way of loving. The key to discovering how I can love is found in being attentive to the actual ways in which God has graced me in my life. Grace is to be relished and remembered, for it is in the light of such graces that we discover who we are. Such remembrance gives rise to gratitude, responsibility and fidelity.

It is in this context that we are invited today to examine our real lives to see what may be blocking love. Jesus does not ask us to go away on our own to think about it. He invites us to sit beside the well and he sits there with us. Each of us is wounded in different ways by the hereditary and environmental factors that affect our different lives. Furthermore, we each have a history of ways in which we have said Yes to sin and have chosen to add our own spiritual pollution to the world. Nothing does us or others more harm than personal sin.

So let us spend some time today and during the week accepting the Church's invitation to sit like the woman beside the well and let Jesus show us his love and reveal the ways in which we are distracted from our deepest longing. We are invited today to pray again for those who, in response to Jesus' invitation are journeying into the Catholic community and who will join us at Easter. Let us also remember our own baptism and hear Jesus say to us as he said to the woman at the well: 'Drink the water that I shall give you, and you will have a spring inside you, welling up to eternal life.'