

Discipleship, Illumination and New Life – a short Scripture series focusing on the Key Gospels of Lent Year A



'I WILL GIVE YOU LIVING WATER'

John 4:1-15

This Lent our Liturgy follows the Gospel of Matthew. In particular we hear the accounts of Jesus and the woman of Samaria, the Healing of the Blind Bartemeus and the raising of Lazarus.

John Huntriss, Scripture Scholar reflects on each of these Gospel accounts and offers us some questions to ponder. Listen to the video and then take some time to quietly reflect. You may wish to do this with other people in your parish or simply as a time of personal prayer. We suggest that you:

1. Read the Gospel
2. Watch the Video
3. Ponder the questions offered. Below follows John's text.

VIDEO ONE

JOHN 4:1-42 THE WOMAN AT THE WELL

Jesus seems to be deliberately obscure: why? It is not the only time: he did the same with Nicodemus (3:1-11) before teasing him for not understanding (12), and he will do so again. (Note that we have only a little of the conversation; and we know it came to a successful conclusion two days later. Nor can we see if there was a playful twinkle in his eye.)

Is it related to his speaking in parables? See Matthew 13: 1-17 & 34-5, where 13: 14-15 quotes Isaiah 6:9-10. Jesus saw himself, and others saw him, as standing in the tradition of prophets (like Isaiah), who frequently used parables in their teaching.

Is it a way to penetrate people's resistance to the message?

There is the whole mystery of why some people accept the Gospel and others do not. More than once, Jesus is amazed at non-Jews apparently accepting it more readily than many Jews: he finds himself a "prophet without honour in his own country". In this story he makes converts among Samaritans.

John 16:25 he acknowledges he has been speaking in proverbs and metaphors; but will not be doing so for much longer.

Note vv.10-14 the contrast between water from Jacob's well, which satisfies for a while only, and the water Jesus will give which will satisfy to eternity.

We have the same contrast in 3: 13-14. Numbers 21 :4-9 tells of a bronze serpent erected by Moses in the desert when there was a plague of snakes. Those who looked on this bronze serpent were spared death, and lived only to die in due time, while those who contemplate Jesus "lifted up" have eternal life. Again in 6:58 - those who ate the manna in the desert needed to eat it daily, and died in due course; but "he who eats this bread will live to eternity".

So, three times we are taught that what had been in the past was temporary and provisional, but now what Jesus is and does is for eternity. (This is also very much the teaching of Hebrews.)

Ponder the symbolism of water.

It is "living water" that Jesus offers. In Jeremiah 2:13 God accuses the people of deserting him, the source of living water, to dig for themselves leaky wells or cisterns which do not hold water. Like Jacob's well in John 4, the water here is still, perhaps even stagnant. Things fall into wells. Spring water is sparkling, lively.

Jesus speaks here (4: 14) of water "leaping up" to eternal life in those who drink it: a graphic Greek word which is used only twice more in the New Testament, speaking of lame men healed and leaping to their feet.

The words of 4:14 are taken up in 7:37-39. The scene there is the Feast of Tabernacles, whose rites included the pouring out of water. Look also at the beginning of Isaiah 55, or at Psalm 36: 8-9.

In the Old Testament running water may be specified for purification rites (Leviticus 14:5, Numbers 19: 1-7); and some Christians have preferred it for Baptism. For Christians, water is one of the signs of the Holy Spirit.

The next chapter of John speaks of water which heals when it is disturbed (5: 1-4). In John 19: 34 blood and water stream from the pierced side of the dead Jesus: signs of the Mass and of Baptism. We take life from his death. This echoes Ezekiel 47: the prophet has a vision of the Temple restored after the exile in Babylon, a stream flowing from its side which brings fertility, life and health: fruit trees on its banks crop not annually but monthly (undoing the curse of Genesis 3: 17-19 which sentenced Adam to hard toil to provide food). Revelation 22: 1-2 recycles this vision of Ezekiel. In Exodus 17: 1-7 Moses in the desert strikes the rock "with his staff, and water gushes from it for the people: this, too, is seen as pointing to Jesus.

St. Augustine said that Jesus' real thirst was for the woman's faith. Scripture speaks often of the prayer of longing for God as being like thirst (beginnings of Psalms 42 & 63). In the last letter he wrote, Dr. Pusey said, "The parched soil, by its cracks, opens itself for the Incarnate from heaven and invites it. The parched soul cries out for the Living God. Oh! then, long and long and long, and God will fill thee."

TO PONDER John 4:- 15-30

"An hour is coming" v. 23. The theme of his "hour" recurs, especially in John (first occurring at 2:4), which builds tension, once we start to notice it: what will it mean? We shall see in 12:23 & 17: 1. The theme of Jesus "hour" is not only in John (so it is not his invention) but e.g. Mark 14: 35.

What did Jesus expect to happen? Did he know? (Did his "self-emptying" when he became man limit his knowledge?) Clearly he has some expectation of bringing things to a decisive head e.g. Luke 12:49-53.

In John there is a series of sayings which begin "I am. .." : in the next two weeks we shall have "I am the Light of the World" (9:5) and "I am the Resurrection" (11: 25). It would not have been surprising to find "I am the Water of Life" this week, but we don't: no such saying of Jesus is anywhere recorded.

Then, there are places where in Greek he says simply, "I am", but in a way that does not work in English. 4:26 here is literally "I am, the one speaking to you", but the translator must put something more like "I am he, I who am speaking to you"; or in Mark 6:50 "It is I" instead of "I am". The English reader will be unaware unless helped by a footnote. The significance is that we may hear an echo of God's own name "I AM", revealed to Moses in Exodus 3: 13-15. John 8:58 is as plain in English as in Greek: "Before Moses was, I am".

These two groups of sayings, ("I am the. .." and "I am"), make us think about Jesus' relationship with the One God of Israel. "The Father and I are one", he says (John 1 0:30).

Where should worship be offered? Mount Gerizim? or Mount Zion (in Jerusalem)? or neither?

What is Jesus' relationship to the Temple? He faithfully goes to Jerusalem for the festivals. He pays his annual contribution to the upkeep of the Temple (Matthew 17:24-7). But in Matthew 24, Mark 13, & Luke 21 he foresees the end of the Temple in words very reminiscent of Jeremiah 7:1-15 (also 26: 1-18, where 18 quotes Micah 3:12): the threat of God withdrawing his favour from the Temple as his people have forsaken him.

Those same three accounts all record that the veil of the Temple was torn in two at the moment of Jesus' death. Some read this as symbolising that the Temple is now redundant.

John's references to the Temple are more subtle. We have noted how the stream from Jesus' side echoes the life-giving stream from the side of the Temple in Ezekiel's vision. The theme of Jesus and the Temple is first introduced in I: 14, where the Greek says not that the Word "lived" among us but that he "pitched his tent among us". What does that mean? In Exodus 33:7-11 the Tent of Meeting is the focus of God's presence with his people in the desert. In later times Solomon had the Temple built in Jerusalem, replacing that tent with something fixed and permanent; but as he consecrates it he asks, "Will God indeed dwell on earth?" (I Kings 8:27). Indeed, he will, in later times when the Incarnate Word will be what the Tent and the Temple had been: the focus of God's presence with us ("Immanuel God-with-us").

What the Temple was in a provisional way, he is eternally. (That pattern again!) His driving the merchants from the Temple in 2: 13-22 is to be read as a symbolic act (though this is not clear in all translations), and we are told its meaning: that the risen Christ will be the new temple. Hebrews (especially 9) sees Jesus as fulfilling what the temple and its ritual foreshadowed.

In the Greek, John 1 has several little echoes of Ecclesiasticus 24, where the Wisdom of God pitches her tent among his people: the Word, the Wisdom, and the Law of God being closely related ideas. According to one calculation of the calendar, Jesus was born at the time in mid-winter of the festival of the Temple's re-dedication in 164 B. C. (the festival of Hanukkah): another little hint.

TO PONDER John 4-: 31-42

The theme of food.

Matthew 4:4 Jesus replies to the tempter with words from Deuteronomy 8:3 – “Not on bread alone shall man live, but on every word which comes from the mouth of God.” Here, his food is to do the Father’s will and to complete his work.

What sustains me? What is meat and drink to me?

In the Lord’s Prayer, “Thy will be done” comes shortly before “Give us this day our daily bread”.

In a couple of chapters, “I am the Bread of Life” will be the theme of 6.

“To complete ... ” – it does not show in translation, but this particular Greek word recurs at key points – 13: I he loved them “to the end”; I 7:4 “completing” the work & 23 “completely” one; 19: 30 “It is completed”. [The way such themes recur, as in a piece of music, help tie the whole composition together.]

The theme of harvest. We noted earlier the monthly harvests which are a sign of God’s blessing in the vision of Ezekiel 4 7. Agricultural abundance is promised in Deuteronomy 28: 1-5 if the people remain faithful to God; and when Moses sent a reconnaissance party into the Promised Land they returned with a sample of its out-size fruit and a report that the land flowed with milk and honey (Numbers 13:23-27). Harvest is often the theme of Jesus’ parables e.g. in Matthew J 3. It can be an image of judgement, notably in Revelation 14:14-20.

Jesus reaps a good harvest of souls in this Samaritan town. 37-8 Jesus reaped where the Baptist sowed: apostles will reap where Jesus sowed: John’s readers will reap where apostles sowed. See also I Corinthians 3:5-9.

How can I help to bring in a harvest of souls?

Jesus insists on the hard evidence of what he does, which can be more persuasive than words: see John 10:38. “By their fruits shall you know them”, he said (Matthew 12:33).

St. Francis reputedly said, “Preach the Gospel. Use words if you have to.”

In the parable, the sower sows seed all over the place: most comes to nothing, but some does very well. Seed may lie dormant for years before germinating.

P.S. A Greek tradition identifies the Samaritan woman as St. Photina and says that with her sons Ss. Joseph and Victor she was martyred in Rome under Nero.