

February 24, 2008

Third Sunday of Lent

Exodus 17:3-7

Romans 5:1-2, 5-8

John 4:5-42

Reflection

In the famous conversation between Jesus and a Samaritan woman, a conversation which bewildered Jesus' disciples, the unnamed woman stands as the embodiment of all Samaritans. The Samaritans were descendents of the ancient northern Israelites and other groups of people who were forcibly settled in their land.

Through this encounter, Jesus hoped to reunite the Samaritans with his own Jewish people, who regarded them as heretics. Not coincidentally, the meeting took place at the well of Jacob, a common ancestor in the faith.

But what of the five ex-husbands? In Jesus' time the Jewish people, and, quite possibly, the Samaritans, saw the relationship between a people and their god in terms of a marriage covenant. Therefore the ex's were actually the false gods whom the various groups making up the Samaritans had worshiped. Now they too were waiting for the Messiah. And the Messiah had come to stay with them.

The Messiah, this story tells us, had come not only for his fellow Jews, but for the Samaritans as well. And for the first hearers of John's Gospel. And for all people who would worship God "in Spirit and truth." Does this include us?

When we are buried in snow or enduring torrential rains, it's hard to appreciate how precious water is for many people. The ancient Israelites associated the appearance of a rain cloud with the presence

of God. If we think of the near drought we had last summer, perhaps we can understand their point of view. Water was so important that our Samaritan woman was willing to go to the well in the heat of midday to get some.

Jesus, in turn, offered the woman “living water.” “Living water” was what we would call running water, and the woman was confused. Then Jesus made an extraordinary claim: “the water I shall give will become...a spring of water welling up to eternal life.” Jesus was talking about the gift of himself in Baptism and what would come from that gift.

We all know, of course, that one drink of water won't last us too long. We have to replenish ourselves with fluids over and over again. We thirst for a lot of other things too. Sooner or later most of us find ourselves thirsting to understand the ultimate meaning of life. There are plenty of things masquerading as this ultimate meaning. Generally they come unmasked—sooner or later. The expression, “you can't take it with you,” comes to mind.

Elsewhere in the Gospel of John, Jesus said, “I am the way and the truth and the life.” He was offering himself as the way to ultimate meaning, as the path to the divine. In the course of his ministry, Jesus used many images to reveal himself and his mission. In today's story, he used water, the birthplace and nursery of life. This water, the living water of Baptism, would unite us to God and bring us to eternity.

Now, the majority of us were baptized as babies, educated in the faith as children, and perhaps learned to take the teachings of Jesus for granted. We may not often feel part of the divine life in the course of our daily activities. Especially when things are hard. But our Baptism tells us that we now share God's life. Each of us and all of us are springs of living water, which will never run dry. Each of us and all of us are successors to those Samaritans with whom the Messiah came to stay. Each of us and all of us can lead one another to Christ

through the example of our lives. For we are immersed—we are swimming in the Spirit which is God and in the Truth which is love.