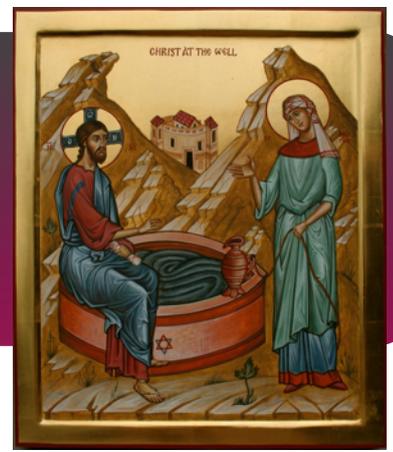


BIBLICAL RESOURCES

And remember, I am with you always



Sunday 23 March (Lent 3A14) *The woman at the well*

Exodus 17:3-7; Psalm 95 (94); Romans 5:1-2, 5-8; John 4:5-42

“I am he,
the one
who is
speaking to
you.”

As the gospel is very long, it is more practical to read it from your own Bible.

Initial Observations

This story is found only in the Fourth Gospel. The first four chapters of this Gospel address the different “constituencies” of the Gospel’s readers: followers of the Baptist (1:19-51), the Jews (2:1-12), the Pharisees (3:1-21), the Samaritans (our Gospel today) and the Gentiles (4:46-54).

Old Testament Background

(i) Often in the Bible, God’s covenant is described as a marriage bond:

You shall no more be termed Forsaken, and your land shall no more be termed Desolate; but you shall be called My Delight Is in Her, and your land Married; for the Lord delights in you, and your land shall be married. For as a young man marries a young woman, so shall your builder marry you, and as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you. (Isaiah 62:4-5)

(ii) Very often, New Testament stories are based on patterns in the Old Testament, which can be

strikingly illuminating. Here, the “type scene” of meeting your future wife at a well is used, following Jacob and Moses. The pattern is as follows (see Ex 2 and Gen 29):

OT	John 4
A man arrives at well	Jesus arrives at Jacob’s well
Women come to draw water	The Samaritan woman comes to draw water
Some “problem” about the water	Jesus has no bucket; Jews don’t share utensils with Samaritans
Recognition	Very extended recognition of Jesus
The women go back to tell those at home	The Samaritan woman goes and tells the people in the town
The man is received	The town receives Jesus
A wedding!	? See Jn 4:46!!

(iii) The Samaritans were regarded by their Jewish neighbours as “mongrel” believers. This helps us to understand the five husbands (= five deities, as we see):

The king of Assyria brought people from *Babylon, Cuthab, Avva, Hamath, and Sepharvaim*, and placed them in the cities of Samaria in place of the people of Israel; they took possession of Samaria, and settled in its cities. When they first settled there, they did not worship the Lord. (2Kings 17:24-25a)

What kind of writing is this?

This story is a symbolic narrative, typical of John’s Gospel. There may be a remote historical basis, but as it stands it is not historical. Typically

for this Gospel (i) there is a one-to-one encounter; (ii) the person encountered makes a considerable journey of faith (*Jew, greater than Jacob, prophet, Christ, Saviour of the world*); (iii) the exchanges have two layers of meaning (living water = running water). Intriguingly, this woman becomes a herald.

Jesus’ question about her husband is only an *apparent* change of subject — as her next observation shows. Jesus first tries to communicate using the symbolic language of water (= **worship**). He changes his approach, using the (equally) symbolic language of marriage (= **worship**). Finally, he has a breakthrough, using the symbolic language of the temple (= **worship**). Only a later, *moralising* reading thinks of Jesus as exposing the disastrous moral life of the woman, forgetting perhaps that it is not immoral to have five *wives* — merely unlucky.

New Testament Foreground

(i) In John 1-4, bridegroom language is used of Jesus: 2:1-11 and 3:29. (ii) After the scene at the well, the wedding feast of Cana is invoked, without apparent purpose: 4:46. This recalls the wedding feast and brings in the seventh stage of the type scene — but Jesus is the bridegroom, not of the Samaritans, but of the chosen people, the Jews, and believing Christians. (iii) Images combining marriage and water for the Risen Jesus come up again in the book of Revelation:

And the angel said to me, “Write this: Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb.” And he said to me, “These are true words of God.” (Revelation 19:9) Then one of the seven angels who had the

seven bowls full of the seven last plagues came and said to me, "Come, I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb." (Revelation 21:9) The Spirit and the bride say, "Come." And let everyone who hears say, "Come." And let everyone who is thirsty come. Let anyone who wishes take the water of life as a gift. (Revelation 22:17)

St Paul

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect. (Romans 12:1–2)

Brief Commentary

Verses 4-6 The scene is set; Jacob's well and his marriages are recalled.

Verses 7-15 Ironic misunderstandings (clear to the reader) provoking a deeper insight. "Living water" and "running water" are the same in Greek, hence the confusion of the woman. Jesus speaks of a spring ("flowing") while the woman speaks of well ("stagnant"). The Gospel reader recalls, of course, John 7:37-39:

On the last day of the feast, the greatest day, Jesus stood up and shouted out, "If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink. Just as the scripture says, 'From within him will flow rivers of living water.'" (Now he said this about the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were going to receive, for the Spirit had not yet been given, because Jesus was not yet glorified.) (John 7:37–39 NET Bible; the NRSV is not at all accurate here.)

Verses 16-26 Apparent change of subject to personal morality—but actually about authentic worship. The woman spots the change immediately and the conversation continues smoothly about genuine worship and what God desires of us. The expression "I am" echoes Exodus 3:14 and begins the long role of "I am" sentences unique to this Gospel (John 4:26; 6:20, 35, 41, 48, 51; 8:12, 18, 24, 28, 58; 9:9; 10:7, 9, 11, 14; 11:25; 13:19; 14:6; 15:1, 5; 18:5–6, 8).

Thought for the day

Today we are greatly helped by the wonderful Gospel of the Woman at the Well. On the third attempt, Jesus finally gets through to her but after that there is no stopping her. She represents us: what do I thirst for? What is the most important thing in my life? Where do I now find God? By relentless challenge and resolute honesty, we too can be led to that encounter with Jesus, which changes everything, "giving life a new horizon and a decisive direction." May we come to believe because we have heard him ourselves and we know that he really is the saviour of the world.

Prayer

In the midst of the ordinary things, loving God, you call us to the deeper realities: your thirst for us and our thirst for you. Never let us be satisfied, until we come to the springs of living water, welling up for eternal life.

Verses 27-38 Simultaneous telling. The conversation with the disciples is a double echo: (i) of the Temptation, otherwise not in this Gospel and (ii) of the sending out of the Twelve and the Seventy-two in Matthew, Mark and Luke. The harvest has begun, including the bringing in of the Samaritans, Pharisees, Gentiles and followers of the Baptist.



Verses 39-42 This completes the sixth stage of the type scene and closes the story with a very advanced confession of the identity of Jesus. The seventh stage of the type-scene, i.e. the wedding, is alluded to in the subsequent verse 46, which recalls the wedding feast of Cana, apparently to no purpose. Within the tradition, the messiah fulfills God's marriage bond with his first chosen people, the Jews (represented by the mother in that account). The final speech of the townspeople is in the symbolic language of the Johannine community. Compare the wording in 1John 1:1–4.

Pointers for Prayer

1. Jesus leads the woman along a wonderful journey towards a deeper and fuller life. You can enter the story with Jesus, the ideal leader, parent, teacher, or spiritual guide. Notice how he meets the woman where she is, needing her assistance, how he is patient with her, but also challenges her to grow to what she is capable of. Perhaps you have been such a teacher, or you can recall people who were.
2. You can also enter the story from the perspective of the woman's journey. Notice the steps along the way: suspicion, distrust, curiosity, misunderstanding and conversion. Her journey was one in which a very human motivation attracted her to Jesus: the thought of having water in such a way that she did not have to come and draw it from the well. What have been the human motives that have attracted you to faith, prayer, religion, church and which have been stepping-stones to a deeper personal relationship with Jesus? Perhaps we can also see the same movement in the growth of some of our human relationships.
3. The woman's final tactic is to attempt to buy time before responding (v.25) —it will all happen sometime in the future. Jesus points out that the time for a faith response is NOW. How have you discovered the importance of the NOW moment?
4. You can also enter the story with Jesus, the ideal leader, parent, teacher, or spiritual guide. Notice how he meets the woman where she is, needing her assistance, how he is patient with her, but also challenges her to grow to what she is capable of.

Prayer

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 every-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 for ever and ever. Amen.

Water flowed through the desert like a river

Exod 17:1 *From the wilderness of Sin the whole congregation of the Israelites journeyed by stages, as the LORD commanded. They camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink. 2 The people quarreled with Moses, and said, "Give us water to drink." Moses said to them, "Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the LORD?" 17:3 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?" 4 So Moses cried out to the LORD, "What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me." 5 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. 6 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. 7 He called the place Massah and Meribah, because the Israelites quarreled and tested the LORD, saying, "Is the LORD among us or not?"*

Initial Observations

This short, perhaps disconcerting, reading is chosen for two reasons. First of all, it continues the story line from Adam to the Exile, with a brief profile of Moses. Secondly, it

establishes the imagery of water, which is one of three key metaphors in the Gospel reading.

Apart from such formal considerations, the reading is rich in emotion and feeling. Who has not at times felt that an apparent improvement can feel—at least in the short term—less than satisfactory? There is a second account of this story in the book of Numbers (see below). In the Numbers version, this story has a tragic dénouement for Moses and Aaron: on account of their apparent disobedience / mistrust, neither will enter the promised land. Two opening verses have been included here.

Where does the reading come from?

The book of Exodus has the following outline:

- The Exodus: 1:1-15:21
- Towards Sinai: 15:22-18:27**
- Sinai covenant: 19:1-24:11
- Decalogue / tabernacle: 24:12-31:18
- Golden calf incident: 32:1-34:35
- Tabernacle: 35:1-40:38

Our passage comes from the journey to Sinai.

What kind of writing is this?

A brief dramatic incident, available in two traditions. The dominance of water is also a mark of Moses, who was “saved” by the Nile at birth, took people across the Red Sea and here produced water from the rock.

Old Testament Background

Now there was no water for the congregation; so they gathered together against Moses and against Aaron. The people quarreled with Moses and said, “Would that we had died when our kindred died before the LORD! Why have you brought the assembly of the LORD into this wilderness for us and our livestock to die here? Why have you brought us up out of Egypt, to bring us to this wretched place? It is no

place for grain, or figs, or vines, or pomegranates; and there is no water to drink.” Then Moses and Aaron went away from the assembly to the entrance of the tent of meeting; they fell on their faces, and the glory of the LORD appeared to them. The LORD spoke to Moses, saying: Take the staff, and assemble the congregation, you and your brother Aaron, and command the rock before their eyes to yield its water. Thus you shall bring water out of the rock for them; thus you shall provide drink for the congregation and their livestock.

So Moses took the staff from before the LORD, as he had commanded him. Moses and Aaron gathered the assembly together before the rock, and he said to them, “Listen, you rebels, shall we bring water for you out of this rock?” Then Moses lifted up his hand and struck the rock twice with his staff; water came out abundantly, and the congregation and their livestock drank. But the LORD said to Moses and Aaron, “Because you did not trust in me, to show my holiness before the eyes of the Israelites, therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land that I have given them.” These are the waters of Meribah, where the people of Israel quarreled with the LORD, and by which he showed his holiness. (Num 20:2–13)

How does the Responsorial Psalm relate to this reading?

Psalm 95 (94), itself a response to the story here, is perfect. The response even looks forward to the woman at the well: *O that today you would listen to his voice! Harden not your hearts.*

Themes across the readings

The symbolism of water (lightly alluded to Romans with the phrase “poured into our hearts”) takes us across all three readings. In a very human way, the OT reading voices regret and disappointment with the

1	Gen 2:7-9; 3:1-7	Adam	Rom 5:12-19	Second Adam	Mt 4:1-11	The Temptations
2	Gen 12:1-4	Abraham	2 Tim 1:8-10	God's grace	Mt 17:1-9	The Transfiguration
3	Ex 17:3-7	Moses	Rom 5:1-2, 5-8	God's love	Jn 4:5-42	Samaritan woman
4	1 Sam 16:1, 6-7, 10-13	David	Eph 5:8-14	Light of Christ	Jn 9:1-41	Man born blind
5	Ez 37:12-14	The Exile	Rom 8:8-11	Jesus will give life	Jn 11:1-15	Lazarus

“liberation.” A great strength of the reading is that the people at least *know* that they are thirsty and are able to name their need.

The reading from Romans (why not restore the poetic missing verses 3 and 4?) constitutes a tremendous affirmation of all we have received in Christ. In particular, the Holy Spirit—the evocation of the Spirit will be fully explored in Romans 8.

John 4 has many levels of meaning. Perhaps three hints may help. It is a story of *pre-evangelisation*, that is the awakening of an unrecognised spiritual thirst. It tells of the *pilgrimage* of faith in Christ, in ever-deepening stages (from being “a” Jew to the saviour of the world). It illustrates *mission*, as the woman drops her bucket and the real success of mission when the people believe *on their own account*.

Brief Commentary

Verse 1 Rephidim is the last station before Sinai (Ex 19:2; Num 33:14-15).

Verse 2 Testing God means demanding proof that God was really in charge of what was happening. Cf. v. 7; also: Ex 8;18; Dt 7:21; 31:17; Josh 3:10. The two preceding incidents were also tests (15:25-26 and 16:4).

Verse 3 cf. The Israelites said to them, “If only we had died by the hand of the LORD in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger.” (Exod 16:3)

Verse 4 Not the only time!

Verse 5 The elders function as witnesses here.

Verse 6 Horeb is the other name for Sinai. Notice that in this J version God *commands* Moses to strike the rock (contrast the P version in Numbers). The Lord is present, somehow in a visible manner. Cf. The LORD went in front of them in a pillar of cloud by day, to lead them along the way, and in a pillar of fire by night, to give them light, so that they might travel by day and by night. (Exod 13:21)

Verse 7 Massah = Testing and Meribah = quarrelling. V.7 recalls v. 2 above. The names eventually became symbolic of lack of trust as in Deut 6:16; 9:22; Ps 95:8.

Pointers for Prayer

1. Sometimes after a decision has been taken and a new direction entered upon, we experience regret and doubt. What have I felt this way? Was it a healthy caution or something else?

2. Often as believers, we do wonder where is God in all this mess. This can be general (some incident or other) or quite personal, when a tragedy strikes or things simply turn very differently. Was I able to see God present after all in hindsight?

Prayer

God, all along the way, you are with us, even when we are not aware and or even sure of your presence.

Help us to keep alive our trust in you, “with us always to the end of the age,” so that our life’s journey will not be alone or in vain.

Sunday Introductions

First Reading

Exodus 17:3-7

Following on the stories of Adam and Abraham, today we hear of Moses. Perhaps we can identify with the reaction of the Israelites: being set free doesn’t always feel that way, at least initially.

Second Reading

Romans 5:1-2, 5-8

Paul is a great believer in the Holy Spirit, *poured* into the hearts of all believers, including ourselves. Because of this great gift, we can call the creator of all, Abba, father.

Gospel

John 4:5-42

Our Gospel today is long and very rich in meaning, using many images. Among the images: living (= flowing) water, marriage and the location of worship. Perhaps this year, one of the images or a line will speak to me today and the situation in which I find myself?

Weekday Introductions

Monday 24 March

2 Kings 5:1-15

Our dramatic first reading helps us to understand today’s Gospel. There the good news goes beyond the ethnic boundaries of Judaism.

Tuesday 25 March *The Annunciation*

Isaiah 7:10-14, 8:10

In its original setting, this prophetic word meant that a woman in the royal house would have a baby. In its Christian reading, it reminds us that Jesus too is a descendent of David, a mark of God’s fidelity.

Hebrews 10:4-10

Hebrews—an early Jewish-Christian document—emphasises that Jesus’ offering was not a mechanical exchange but true obedience—obedience of heart.

Luke 1:26-38

There are many ways to hear this quite magical Gospel. Perhaps in light of the second reading, these words stand out: *‘I am the handmaid of the Lord let what you have said be done to me.’*

Wednesday 26 March

Deuteronomy 4:1, 5-9

God’s election and guidance are of course gifts...gifts, nevertheless, which ought not to lead to any kind of complacency. As we thank God for his word, let us ask his help to live that same word in our lives.

Thursday 27 March

Jeremiah 7:23-28

A very typical reading from Jeremiah, forthright and challenging. Am I included in this assessment? To some degree at least we all are, if we are honest.

Friday 28 March

Hosea 14:2-10

This reading invites us to turn back to God. It then goes on to explore God’s welcome and forgiveness in a series of rich images and metaphors.

Saturday 1 June *St Justin*

Hosea 5:15-6:6

The mixture of abject petition and strong condemnation is quite striking in this reading. *Both* are a call to conversion of heart today.