

WATER OF LIFE: A Reflection on John 4

THE WOMAN AT THE WELL TODAY

Jesus sits by a well, thirsty. It's a scene repeated daily by the large percentage of the world's population who rely on wells or village pumps to supply this most basic of life's needs. The water is there, available for any to use who have a bucket. It is a common good.

What would happen to this story of the woman at the well if it had occurred in a world where market forces alone were at work? Let's look first at the less serious version.

Jesus is not sitting beside the well, but outside the fence put up by the company that now owns the well and the water in it. He has no money, because, as the story tells us, his disciples have gone to town to buy food, taking their common purse [cf. Jn 12.6]. If he wants water, he needs money to buy it. So when the Samaritan woman appears, Jesus begs from her. When she shows her surprise that this man is begging from her, he says, "If you knew who it is that is saying to you, 'Spare some change today?' you would have asked him and he would have given you living money."

Later on, Jesus says to her, "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. For both will be privately owned and you won't be able to get access to them."

Meanwhile the disciples have returned and are urging him, "Rabbi, eat something." But he says to them, "I have food to eat that you do not know about – I've done a sponsorship deal with Macdonald's. But I tell you, the fields are ripe for harvesting. I sent you to reap that for which you did not labour, like unto

shareholders reaping profits from what the sweatshop workers have laboured over."

Then the woman goes back to town, leaving her water jar. Immediately Thomas grabs the jar and says, "I can get a good price for this on e-Bay." And so it is that the Newman Development and Peace group found this water jar, among the 25,000 authenticated water-jars-left-by-the-well-by-the-Samaritan-woman-of-John-Chapter-4 up for auction on e-Bay.

A RIGHT TO LIFE ISSUE

Some today would like to see this kind of change. They would like to see water treated like any other commodity, subject to market forces, with no concern for the common good. One of the scariest parts of that horror movie, *The Corporation*, was the true story of a city in Bolivia where the water supply was privatised. The company which took possession took their charge very seriously. They banned even the collecting of the rain water which fell from the sky. In the end, the people rose up, despite fierce and violent repression by the government, and reclaimed control of the distribution of this essential element of life.

And it is essential. Without water, we die - simply die. Without food, we can last a long time, *if* we have water. But without water, we die - within a few days or a few hours, depending on our health and our environment. Without clean water, we may live longer, but we risk illnesses that may threaten life. That's why the Holy See, in a statement to the 3rd World Water Forum in 2003, said that access to safe water is a right to life issue.¹ Without water, we die.

WATER IN SCRIPTURE

Scripture has at least 620 verses making reference to water.

The opening verses of the Bible portray God's creative Spirit hovering over the waters [Gen 1.2]; the closing verses invite all who are thirsty to come: "Let anyone who wishes take the water of life as a gift." [Rev 22.17] In between, we find many references to water's role in the natural realm - source of life for all humans and animals and plants, as the Biblical peoples, desert-dwellers, knew only too well. No wonder that it became for Judaism, as for other religions of the world, a powerful metaphor for God's grace, for God's supernatural life – as essential to our spiritual life as natural water is to our physical life.

But even beyond its basic necessity for life, water offers other benefits, as Scripture also notes in its metaphors.

Firstly, water cools and calms, settling us and our spirits. "Near restful waters he leads me, to revive my drooping spirit." [Ps 23.2-3]. "With consolations I will lead them back, I will let them walk by brooks of water." [Jer 31.9] Cooling and calming. And also cleansing. "I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean from all your unclean-nesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you." [Ezek 36.24-25]. Cooling, calming, cleansing. But water can also be consuming – overwhelming, destroying – and in Scripture it is God alone who can control the threatening, consuming waters and rescue us from them. We, too, cry out with the Psalmist at times: "Save me, O God, for the waters have come up to my neck.... I have come into deep waters, and the flood sweeps over me ... Let me be delivered from my enemies and from the deep waters." [Ps 69] And God answers us, as He does in Isaiah, "When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you." [Is 43.2]

Cooling and calming, cleansing and consuming. But the most frequent image is still the most basic - water as the essential element for life.

Without water, we die, physically. And God ever reminds us that, without Him, we die, spiritually. Our deepest thirst, like that of the woman at the well, is for God: "O God, you are my God, for you I long; for you my soul is thirsting, like a dry, weary land,

without water." [Ps 63.1] And like Jesus sitting by the well, God's deepest thirst is for our salvation: "Everyone who thirsts, come to the waters... Come to me; listen, so that you may live. ... For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there until they have watered the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, .. so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish ... the thing for which I sent it." [Is 55:1-11].

It is God who provides water, even where we expect to find none.

In today's first reading, he brings water gushing from a rock [Ex17.6] And He brings water to the desert: "The lame shall leap like a deer, the tongue of the speechless sing for joy. For waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert; the burning sand shall become a pool, and the thirsty ground springs of water; the haunt of jackals shall become a swamp, the grass shall become reeds and rushes." [Is 35.6-7]

In Ezekiel 47, the waters of life flow from the Temple, like a huge river: "When it enters ... the sea of stagnant waters, the water will become fresh. Wherever the river goes, every living creature that swarms will live, and there will be very many fish, once these waters reach there. It will become fresh; and everything will live where the river goes. People will stand fishing beside the sea... On the banks... of the river, there will grow all kinds of trees for food... Their fruit will be for food, and their leaves for healing. And their leaves will not wither nor their fruit fail..., because the water for them flows from the sanctuary"

In John's Gospel, Jesus is the new sanctuary [2.19-22]. He cries out from the heart of the Temple that He is the one to whom all who thirst should come to drink [7.37-39]. To the woman at the well today, he promises living water by which you will never be thirsty again, for it will become a spring of water gushing up within you to eternal life [4:7-14]. She leaves her water jar behind, for she can never again be satisfied simply with natural water, but only with living water of Christ for which she now thirsts [4.28]. And from the Cross, His blood drained to the last drop, it is this water of life that pours from His dead side [Jn 19.34]. This is the water in which our catechumens will be baptised at Easter, for, as Jesus says, that they may "enter the kingdom of God ... being born of water and the Spirit." [3.5] This is

the water we will find in all its fullness when we join the saints, in that place where "the Lamb ... will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes." [Rev 7.17].

Ultimately it is this promise of the fullness of life in the kingdom of God that the Church offers to a world thirsting for the One who can only be worshipped in spirit and truth [Jn 4.23-24]. But we do well to remember that our own entrance to that kingdom depends on Jesus being able to say to us, "I was thirsty and you gave me to drink." [Mt 25:35] This call is echoed in the teaching of the Church.

A GIFT & A RIGHT

The Pope recently emphasised two things: that water is a gift of God, and that, being indispensable for basic survival, water is a right of all people.ⁱⁱ

Water is a gift of God - and God has done His part of the job, providing more than enough clean water for the world's needs and more than enough creative human beings to discover ways to better conserve and distribute it.

Our part is to be among those who act in solidarity with our one billion sisters and brothers who have inadequate access to safe drinking water, who have a right to water but who still thirst.

Catholic social teaching reminds us that the "earth and all it contains are for the use of every human being and all peoples,... including future generations... Water is such a common good... The few, with the means to control, cannot destroy or exhaust this resource, which is destined for the use of all."ⁱ

Isaiah proclaims, "When the poor and needy seek water, and there is none, and their tongue is parched with thirst, I the LORD will answer them, I the God of Israel will not forsake them." [Is 41.17] May we, who proclaim our faith in this God, not forsake them either. For it is together with Jesus in today's Gospel that they say to us "Give me a drink." [Jn 4.7]

REFERENCES

ⁱ Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *Note: Water, an Essential Element of Life*, 22 March, 2003

ⁱⁱ ZENIT Daily Dispatch, Item ZE04030308 *Water Is a Right of All, Says John Paul II*, 3 March, 2004