

“Living Water”

Homily of February 27, 2005

by Father Brian Timoney

Last Sunday, Father McGee referred to moments, experiences, encounters that change our lives. As he was speaking, I was remembering that it was just fifty years ago, (In fact just last week was fifty years ago.) that I first set foot on the soil of India. I can say that experience was certainly a life-changing experience for me. There was so much, so much that I learned. And one very seemingly minor, but ultimately very important thing that I learned was the significance of water as the symbol of life, especially in relation to the sacrament of Baptism. Now, you might say that that’s very strange, but remember that I was reared in Ireland where we have plenty of water and where the countryside is always green. So, the full significance of water as the very source of life and sustaining life and the powerful symbolism of that in Baptism never really had come home to me fully. But I saw women every day going to the well, drawing water, a daily chore, a daily drudgery, but absolutely essential.

How many times had this Samaritan woman gone to that well? And yet, this one time changed her whole life. She went to get a bucket of water and went home with a bucket full of grace, of faith. The Living Water that now filled her bucket was the good news of salvation in the person of Jesus Christ. She found meaning in her life. She found a whole bucketful of meaning and she was prepared to share that with others. She went and told her fellow-citizens, “Could this possibly be the Messiah?” You can feel the exhaltation, the thrill in her voice. She became an evangelist. Indeed we might say she became an apostle, proclaiming the great mystery of the Living Water in the person of Jesus Christ.

She found so much at that well. Is there anything there for us? Is there a bucketful of grace, for us? Oh, I think so. There is so much that we can learn from this encounter with Jesus with the Samaritan woman. There is, for example, the attitude of Jesus towards this woman, towards women in general. We are told that the disciples were astonished to find Him talking to a woman. You see, the society in which He lived was extremely patriarchal. Men ruled and women drew water. But here we see a woman talking with Jesus on an equal footing, and being respected by Jesus as an equal. And this, no doubt, was part of the early Christian memory, and resulted in women playing a quite significant part in the very early Church.

As the years, the centuries, went by unfortunately that memory faded and soon women’s role in the Church became, well, inconsequential. Since the Second Vatican Council things, however, have been changing, not perhaps as rapidly or as radically as some might wish, but, for those of you at least who are my age, I think you will recognize what Shakespeare, in another context, described as “ a

sea change into something rich and strange," a change that Jesus would very, very much approve of, a change indeed that He modeled and that He would want us to work for.

There is another thing that we can learn from this encounter at the well. We learn acceptance of others. At that time the attitude of the Jews towards the Samaritans was extremely racist, religiously intolerant. Since they were not Jews and practiced a different form of religion they were despised by the Jews. A good Jew would not even say "Shalom.... Peace" to a Samaritan. And, in this context, the astonishment of the Samaritan woman when she found Jesus speaking to her is very, very understandable. In asking this woman for a drink of water, Jesus is making it very, very clear to all of us, for all the ages, that He was in the business of breaking down barriers that separate people, barriers between men and women in the Church, barriers of race, barriers of class, barriers of religion. He was teaching not just tolerance. I think "tolerance" is very very elitist. Isn't it? ...I don't like you, but I "tolerate" you. No. Jesus was preaching respect and equality. And I think we have to learn that lesson over and over and over again, a message that needs to be heard in our modern world.

It was just about a year ago, I was a chaplain on one of these cruise ships. It was a Holland American Line and, as some of you may know, the majority of the crew on Holland-America ships are from Indonesia and are Muslim. We were only about a day or two out when several people said to me, "Do you think we are safe, Father, with all these Muslims?" Prejudice.... Prejudice. Prejudice, deep down. Discrimination is rampant, on the grounds of race or sex or religion or national origin. And that is totally alien to the mind of Christ, totally alien.

When we draw near to this Fountain of Living Water that is Christ, let us ask for a bucketful of respect for other people. Remember what Paul said. "There does not exist among you Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female. We are all one in Christ Jesus." All are one in Christ Jesus. And being one with Christ Jesus, we are one with all of humanity. Because Christ came to save all of humanity. And He wants us to respect and honor all of humanity. That oneness in Christ that we Christians received in the sacrament of Baptism is renewed and strengthened in this sacrament of Eucharist that we have all come here to celebrate this morning because we share in the one Bread and the one Cup. Think about it. How can there be division if we gather around the one table and share the one Bread and the one Cup?

So, let us today give praise and thanks as we sit by this well of Living Water, the Water of Life, Christ Himself, Our Savior. Amen.