

March 12, 2023 – Third Sunday of Lent
The Woman at the Well
Gospel of John 4:5-42
Fr. John

The gospel of John presents us today with a vignette of an encounter between Jesus and a Samaritan woman. It becomes a model of how a **conversation** can evolve into a **conversion** experience.

First, let us revisit the circumstances in which this encounter takes place.

It's noon, the hottest time of the day and Jesus and his disciples have just crossed into unfriendly territory [Samaria]. His friends go off to purchase something to eat leaving Jesus tired and thirsty sitting by a well. [In today's understanding, 'unfriendly territory' might imply a high crime neighbourhood and the 'well' might symbolize any public gathering place like a bus stop or a park bench].

A Samaritan woman arrives there alone. Why is she alone and without a male chaperone in a public place? Such women in those cultural times were seen as people of questionable moral repute.

Jesus inaugurates a conversation by asking for a drink and in doing so he has already crossed over a cultural, religious, and gender barrier that would have been a definite 'no-no' at that time.

As the conversation proceeds, the woman's response goes from surprise, to sarcasm, to curiosity, and ultimately to faith.

As the water in the well is at a very deep level, so Jesus probes the depths of the woman's life to uncover a spiritual thirst that is far greater than her physical thirst.

So how do we contemporize this biblical encounter in terms of our experiences of life and faith?

During years, when a parish has been preparing candidates for Baptism at Easter, they are called forward on this Sunday after the homily for the rites of scrutinies in which the congregation prays over them, after which they leave the assembly in the company of a catechist to further share the gospel we have just heard. They are encouraged to engage in a conversation about how that biblical event resonates with their personal experiences of coming to faith.

I would be rather surprised if that depth of conversation takes place very often at the wells of our meeting places [be it the coffee shop, the fast food restaurant, or the bar]. More than likely, the topics might be centred around gossip, politics, sports, or whatever is in the news headlines of the day. While these may be laudable topics [well... maybe **not** gossip!], we might ask ourselves: When was the last time we had a conversation or sharing with anyone in which we probed the depths of our faith? Are we more like the Samaritan woman who tries to avoid Jesus' questions by trying to change the topic to more superficial levels.

God is always trying to get us to a deeper level in pondering where we are at in our relationship with Him, with others and within ourselves. But most of the time we don't want to go there because it might be too scary, too threatening.

Even when the woman had to admit her failure in her relationships with men, Jesus didn't shame and dismiss her and tell her that she was unworthy and living in sin. No, he told her to come back and even bring the guy along with her.

She was so excited about the new direction in life that Jesus was offering that she wanted to share that joy with others. Indeed, her whole village would show up and invited Jesus to stay with them for several days. Imagine - unfriendly territory now became friendly! And it all started with a conversation at a well.

Conversion, that change of heart, involves a conversation that we also need to have. Lent is the opportunity to do that - whether it's with a trusted friend, a confessor, a sponsor, or spiritual director. Jesus is there at the well waiting for us to slake our spiritual thirst with 'living water'.

In the Book of Exodus, Moses struck a rock to bring forth water for a thirsting, and belligerent people. He can do that with us as well.