

## Synopsis: Lent III [A] Sunday (March 19) Homily on Jn 4:5-42 (L/17)

Introduction: Today's readings are centered on Baptism and new life. Living water represents God's Spirit Who comes to us in Baptism, penetrating every aspect of our lives and quenching our spiritual thirst. The Holy Spirit of God, the Word of God and the Sacraments of God in the Church are the primary sources of the *living water* of Divine Grace. We are assembled here in the Church to drink this *water* of eternal life and salvation. Washed in it at Baptism, renewed by its abundance at each Eucharist, invited to it in every proclamation of the Word and daily empowered by the anointing of the Spirit, we are challenged by today's Gospel to remain thirsty for the *living water*, which only God can give.

Scripture lessons:The first reading describes how God provided water to the ungrateful complainers of Israel, thus placing Jesus' promise within the context of the Exodus account of water coming from the rock at Horeb. The Responsorial Psalm, Ps 95, refers both to the *Rock of our salvation* and also to our hardened hearts. It reminds us that our hard hearts need to be softened by God through our grace-prompted and -assisted *prayer, fasting and works of mercy which enable us to receive the living water of the Holy Spirit, salvation and eternal life from the Rock of our salvation.* In the second reading, Saint Paul asserts that, as the Savior of mankind, Jesus poured the *living water* of the gift of the Holy Spirit into our hearts. In the Gospel, an unclean and outcast Samaritan woman is given an opportunity to receive the *living water*. Jesus awakened in the woman at the well a thirst for the wholeness and integrity which she had lost, a thirst which He had come to satisfy. This Gospel passage also gives us Jesus' revelation about Himself as the Source of *Living Water* and teaches us that we need the grace of Jesus Christ for eternal life because He is that *life-giving water*.

**Life messages:** 1) We need to allow Jesus free entry into our personal lives. Jesus wishes to come into our "private" life, not to embarrass us, not to judge or condemn us, but to free us, to change us and to offer us what we really need: the *living water of the Holy Spirit*. Let us find this *living water* in the Sacraments, in prayer and in the Holy Bible, especially during this Lenten season. 2) We need to be witnesses to Jesus like the Samaritan woman. Let us have the courage to "be" Jesus for others, especially in those "unexpected" places for unwanted people. Let us also have the courage of our Christian convictions to stand for truth and justice in our day-to-day life. 3) We need to leave the "husbands" behind during Lent as the Samaritan woman did. Today's Gospel message challenges us to get rid of our unholy attachments and the evil habits that keep us enslaved and

idolatrous. Lent is our time to learn from our mistakes of over-indulgence in food, drink, drugs, gambling, promiscuity, or any other addiction that distances us from the *living water*.

LENT III [A] (March 19): Ex 17:3-7; Rom 5:1-2, 5-8; Jn 4: 5-42

Anecdote: # 1: "The dawn is coming!" During those awful days following Dr. King's assassination on April 4, 1968, pandemonium broke out across America. The *New York Times* sent a reporter into Harlem to interview a prominent minister. He was asked what he was going to tell his people on the following Sunday. He replied angrily, "I don't know, but it won't be about the love of Jesus." But on that following Sunday, another pastor in another large city stood in his pulpit. His name was Martin Luther King, Sr. If anyone had a right to anger or despair or revenge, it was he. But Dr. King, Sr. declared, "The night is never so dark that you cannot see a star. Hold on. Keep the Faith. The dawn is coming!" Can we really get along? Yes, with the help of Jesus. Today's Gospel presents the detailed dialogue between Jesus and an ostracized Samaritan woman, teaching us how to get along with those who are different, sharing with them the love of God.

# 2: "No drinkin' and no dancin' area"! A couple of Catholic young men from the North were visiting a dusty little town in the back country of West Texas. It was a hard-shell Baptist town in the Bible belt of the South: "No drinkin' and no dancin' area"! But these two men were strangers; so they asked a cowboy where they might get a drink. "In this town," said the cowboy, "we use whiskey only for snakebite: to wash the wound as first aid." Then he added slyly, "If you guys are so thirsty for whiskey, there's only one poisonous snake in this town and that is in the zoo. So you better get a ticket to the zoo, go to the snake park, get hold of a cobra through the iron bar of its cage and give it a big hug! The zoo keeper will appear immediately with whisky." The woman at the well had a mighty thirst, a thirst like that of these young guys for whiskey, a thirst so big that it led her through five husbands and who knows what else. And still she was thirsty — a thirst caused by the absence of God in her life. A meeting with Jesus gave her the living waters of friendship with Jesus and the anointing of the Spirit of God which restored her dignity and changed her life.

# 3: A Samaritan woman evangelist: There is a Greek monastery at Mount Athos in which nothing female is allowed. Today, it is home to 20 Eastern Orthodox monasteries, and 2,000 monks from Greece and other eastern orthodox countries such as Bulgaria, Serbia and Russia. These monks live an ascetic life, isolated from the rest of the world. The Mount - actually a 335 sq km (130 sq mile) peninsula -

may be the largest area in the world from which women, and female animals, are banned. Men can enter but not women, roosters but not hens, horses but not mares, bulls but not cows. Armed guards patrol the border to ensure that nothing feminine passes the gates. It has been this way for more than 700 years. [Arnold Prater, *The Presence*, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1993).] Separate and definitely not equal: that has been the attitude toward women of many Churches through the ages. So it's really remarkable that this particular Samaritan evangelist happens to be a woman. She would be as surprised about it as anybody. When she first met Jesus, she was surprised that even he talked to her. Once converted, she became an evangelist, enthusiastically introducing Jesus to her fellow villagers.

Introduction: Today's readings are centered on Baptism and new life. Today's liturgy makes use of the symbol of *water* to refer to our relationship with God. *Water* represents God's Spirit Who comes to us in Baptism. Baptism is the outward, symbolic sign of a deep reality, the coming of God as a Force penetrating every aspect of a person's life. The Spirit quenches our spiritual thirst. Just as water in the desert was life-giving for the wandering Israelites, the *water* of a true, loving relationship with Jesus is life-giving for those who accept him as Lord and Savior. We are assembled here in the Church to share in this *water* of eternal life and salvation. The Holy Spirit of God, the Word of God and the Sacraments of God in the Church are the primary sources for the *living water* of Divine Grace. Washed in it at Baptism, renewed by its abundance at each Eucharist, invited to it in every proclamation of the Word, and daily empowered by the Spirit, we are challenged by today's Gospel to remain thirsty for the *living water* which only God can give. The first reading describes how God provided water to the ungrateful complainers of Israel, thus placing Jesus' promise within the context of the Exodus account of water coming from the rock at Horeb. The Responsorial Psalm, Ps 95, refers both to the *Rock of our salvation* and also to our hardened hearts. It reminds us that our hard hearts need to be softened by God through our grace-prompted and -assisted *prayer, fasting and works of mercy which enable us to receive the living water of the Holy Spirit, salvation and eternal life from the Rock of our salvation.* In the second reading, Saint Paul asserts that, as the Savior of mankind, Jesus poured the *living water* of the gift of the Holy Spirit into our hearts. In the Gospel, an unclean Samaritan woman is given an opportunity to receive *living water*. Today's Gospel tells us how Jesus awakened in the woman at the well a thirst for the wholeness and integrity which she had lost, a thirst which He had come to satisfy. In revealing himself as the Messiah to the Samaritan woman, Jesus speaks to her of the fountain of water he will give — the life-giving waters of Baptism. The water that Jesus promises is closely linked to conversion and the forgiveness of sin. Here is a woman who comes to Faith and becomes a

missionary who brings others to Jesus. Jesus recognizes the gifts and ministries of women in his future Church. This is also a narrative about God wooing the outsider or, as Paul will say, “*the godless.*” The Samaritans, who were considered godless in general, in this town end up confessing Jesus as the Savior of “the world.” [This](#) Gospel passage also gives us Jesus' revelation about Himself as the Source of *Living Water* and teaches us that we need the grace of Jesus Christ for eternal life because He is that *life-giving water*.

**The first reading: Exodus 17:3-7:** Today's Gospel gives us Jesus' revelation of Himself as the Source of *Living Water*. Hence, the passage chosen from Exodus tells of the Jews' complaining about their thirst, a figure of human longing for God and spiritual satisfaction. The rock which Moses strikes represents God who gives the *water* (God's own life), essential for our spiritual life. This reading shows us a time when God's people literally thirsted, and God satisfied them. The Israelites had been slaves for several generations in Egypt, and for the most part had forgotten their ancestral religion and their God's Covenant with their patriarch Abraham. Now their new leader, Moses, was telling them that their ancient Lord had at last heard their cries, and was now leading their escape from Egypt back to their homeland. In spite of the mighty deeds God had done for their liberation from Egypt, the former slaves complained that in Egypt they at least were not thirsty. It is astounding to see their lack of Faith.

**The second reading: Rom 5:1-2, 5-8:** In the second reading, Saint Paul asserts that, as the Savior of mankind, Jesus poured the *living water*, or the gift of the Holy Spirit, into our hearts. We need the Holy Spirit to sustain us spiritually, just as we need water to sustain us physically. Through Jesus, God gave us the Spirit when we were dying of thirst. Paul realized that he and all the Jews who kept the Law of Moses were trying to become justified on their own. But keeping the Law is not an adequate means of justification because we are unable to make ourselves worthy of God's favor, whether by good works, keeping the Commandments, rituals or prayers. Grace means the gratuitous, unearned, undeserved love and favor of God for us. By *living water* in today's Gospel, Jesus is referring to this grace or relationship with God and participation in His life. According to Paul, redemption or justification is the gratuitous gift of God manifested in Jesus' saving death on the cross. By virtue of his death, Jesus has *made just*, or *put in right relationship with God*, every sinner who will appropriate His saving gifts by Faith. Faith, then, is the admission that one cannot justify oneself and that it is God who will grant us justification by His grace.

Exegesis: The conversion texts for Cycle A gospel: Since each of the persons featured in the Gospels, e.g. the woman of Samaria (Lent III Sunday), the man born blind (Lent IV) and Lazarus (Lent V), is an example of conversion, their stories offer excellent catechesis for Lenten penitents and hence they were placed in the Lenten Sunday lectionary right from the fourth century. Each of these Gospel texts also features the transforming love of Christ for those whom he calls to salvation; he is living water, light and sight for the blind, and the source of life for all who believe.

Jesus' mission trip from Judea to Galilee: Palestine is only 120 miles long from north to south. Judea is in the extreme south, Samaria in the middle and Galilee in the extreme North. In order to avoid the controversy about baptism, Jesus decided to concentrate his ministry in Galilee. The usual route around Samaria, normally taken by the Jews to avoid the hated Samaritans, took six days. The shortcut (three days' journey), from Judea to Galilee crossed through Samaria and, on the way to the town of Sychar, passed Jacob's well. The well itself was more than 100 feet deep. It was located on a piece of land that had been bought by Jacob (Gn 33:18-19), and later bequeathed to Joseph (Gn 48:22).

Jesus' encounter with an outcast sinner: When Jesus and his disciples reached the well, it was a hot midday, and Jesus was weary and thirsty from traveling. Ignoring the racial barriers and traditional hostility between Samaritans and Jews, Jesus sent his disciples to buy some food in the Samaritan town. It was at this point that a Samaritan woman came to the well to draw water. She had probably been driven away, as a moral outcast, from the common well in the town of Sychar by the other women. It was this woman whom Jesus asked for water, and it is no wonder that she was surprised, because the petitioner was a Jew who hated her people as polluted outcasts and betrayers of Judaism. The scene recalls Old Testament meetings between future spouses at wells. Jacob meets Rebekah at the well of Haran, and Moses and Zipporah meet at a well in Midian.

The background history: This mutual hostility had begun centuries earlier when the Assyrians carried the northern tribes of Israel into captivity. The Jewish slaves betrayed their heritage by intermarrying with the Assyrians, thus diluting their bloodline and creating a "mongrel race" called the Samaritans. The Assyrian men who were relocated to Israel married Jewish women, thus producing a mixed race in Israel as well. Hence, southern Jews considered all Samaritan bloodlines and their heritage impure. By the time the Samaritan Jews returned to their homeland, their views of God had been greatly contaminated. By contrast, when the southern Hebrew tribes were carried off into captivity, they stubbornly resisted the

Babylonian culture. They returned from Babylon to Jerusalem, proud that they had compromised neither their religious convictions nor their culture. So when the Samaritans offered to help to rebuild the Jerusalem Temple, the southern Jews who had returned from exile vehemently rejected Samaritan assistance. Consequently, the rejected and ostracized Samaritans built their own temple on Mount Gerizim. But in 129 B.C. a Jewish general destroyed it, a slap to Samaritan dignity that stung for centuries, deepening the mutual scorn and hostility between Samaritans and Jews.

The Divine touch and conversion: So the water-seeking Samaritan woman who faced Jesus that day belonged to a heritage rejected by the Jews. In addition, she expected scorn simply because she was a woman, for in the ancient Middle East, men systematically degraded women. Finally, this Samaritan woman seemed unwanted by her own people. Since she had had five “husbands,” and was living with a sixth “lover,” she seems to have been considered by fellow villagers a social leper, and she seems to have been driven from the common well of the town by the decent women. Perhaps she had not stopped wishing that somewhere, sometime, some way, God would touch His people — that He would touch her! Jesus’ meeting the Samaritan woman at Jacob’s well illustrates the principal role of Jesus as the Messiah: to reconcile all men and women to the Father. Hence, Jesus deliberately placed himself face-to-face with this person whom, apparently, no one else wanted. Jesus saw in this social outcast and moral wreck a person who mattered to God. The Samaritan woman must have unburdened her soul to this stranger because she had found one Jew with kindness in his eyes instead of an air of critical superiority. She was thirsting for love that would last, love that would fill her full and give purpose to her life. Just as Jesus confronts the woman at the well with the reality of her own sinfulness and brokenness, we must confront our own sinfulness and, in doing so, realize our need for God.

The conversion leading to witnessing: Jesus not only talked with the woman, but in a carefully orchestrated, seven-part dialogue he guided her progressively from ignorance to enlightenment, from misunderstanding to clearer understanding, thus making her the most carefully and intensely catechized person in this entire Gospel. Jesus always has a way of coming into our personal lives. When Jesus became personal with this woman and started asking embarrassing questions about her five husbands, she cleverly tried to change the subject and talk about religion. She didn’t want Jesus to get personal. But Jesus wanted to free her, forgive her, shape her life in a new direction, and change her. He wanted to offer this woman *living water*. At the end of the long heart-to-heart conversation Jesus revealed himself to her as the Messiah, which in turn led her to Faith in him. This

growth in understanding on the part of the woman moved through several stages: first, she called him a Jew, then Sir or Lord, then Prophet, and finally Messiah. When the Samaritans came to hear Jesus because of her testimony, the affirmation of Faith reached its climax as they declared that Jesus was the Savior of the world. Step-by-step Jesus was leading her in her Faith journey. This marginalized woman's enthusiastic response, powerful personal testimony and brave witnessing stand in dramatic contrast to Nicodemus' hesitance (3:9), the crowd's demand for proof (6:25-34) and the Pharisees' refusal to acknowledge the hand of God in the healing of a blind man (9:24-34).

Life messages: 1) We need to allow Jesus free entry into our personal lives. A sign that God is active in our lives is His entering in to our personal, "private" lives. Jesus wants to get personal with us, especially during this Lenten season. Jesus wants to get into our "private" lives. We have a "private" personal life which is contrary to the will of God. Christ wishes to come into that "private" life, not to embarrass us, not to judge or condemn us, not to be unkind or malicious to us. Rather, Christ comes into our "private" personal life to free us, to change us and to offer us what we really need: *living water*. The *living water* is God the Holy Spirit Who enters the soul of the woman through Jesus and his love. We human beings are composed of four parts: mind, body, emotions and spirit. When we let God the Holy Spirit come into us and take control of our thinking, our physical activity, our emotions and our spirit, He can bring harmony to the way we live with all four parts of our humanity. We can find this *living water* in the Sacraments, in prayer and in the Holy Bible.

2) We need to be witnesses like the Samaritan woman, proclaiming Jesus as God and Savior through our loving lives. Let us have the courage to "be" Jesus for others, especially in those "unexpected" places for unwanted people. Let us also have the courage of our Christian convictions to stand for truth and justice in our day-to-day life.

3) We need to be open to others and accept others as they are, just as Jesus did. We have been baptized into a community of Faith so that we may become one with each other as brothers and sisters of Jesus and as children of God. To live this oneness demands that we open ourselves to others and listen to one another. We need to provide the atmosphere, the room, for all to be honestly what they really are: the children of God. It is the ministry of Jesus that we inherit and share. Jesus did not allow the woman's status, past, attitude, or anything else to obstruct his ability to love her. And loving her, he freed her and made her whole, made her the child of God she already was. Let us also open our hearts to one another and

accept each other as God's gifts to us. Thus, we'll experience resurrection in our own lives and in the lives of our brothers and sisters.

4) We need to leave the "husbands" behind during Lent as the Samaritan woman did. Today's Gospel message challenges us to get rid of our unholy attachments and the evil habits that keep us enslaved and idolatrous. Lent is the time to learn from our mistakes of over-indulgence in food, drink, drugs, gambling, promiscuity, or any other addiction that may keep us from coming to the *living waters* of a right relationship with God. We all have our short list, don't we? And we all know, honest to God, what it is we need to leave behind before we come to the *Living Water* and the Bread of Heaven. Let us make an earnest attempt to do so during this Lenten season.

5) We need to turn to Jesus who loves us with non-evaluative, non-judgmental unconditional love: We all face moments when guilt plagues us and we are upset for falling for the same temptations again and again; when we make choices that turn out to be all wrong; when our relationships with others fall in a heap; when we feel lonely, sick and tired of the way people are treating us; when we are depressed and upset and can't see anything good in ourselves; when our faith is at rock bottom and we feel as if the Church and religion aren't doing anything for us; when we beat ourselves up for lack of enthusiasm to be true disciples of Jesus ready to do anything for him, and for days that go by without a word of prayer; when all we feel is failure and defeat. During such moments it is great to read a story about Jesus and his love and acceptance of the woman at the well. Let us rest assured that Jesus is there to accept us warmly and help us to see that he will give us the strength and the power we need to overcome whatever it is that is grieving us.

#### JOKE OF THE WEEK

# 1: Anthony de Mello tells the story of the little girl who asks a boy, "Are you a Presbyterian?" He answers, "No, we belong to another abomination."

# 2: Baptizing cow into fish for Lent: John Smith was the only Protestant to move into a large Catholic neighborhood. On the first Friday of Lent, John was outside grilling a big juicy steak on his grill. Meanwhile, all of his neighbors were eating cold tuna fish for supper. This went on each Friday of Lent. On the last Friday of Lent, the neighborhood men got together and decided that something had to be done about John! He was tempting them to eat meat each Friday of Lent, and they couldn't take it anymore. They decided to try and convert John to Catholicism.

They went over and talked to him and were so happy when he decided to join his neighbors and become a Catholic. After an intensive training in Catholic catechism they took him to their pastor and got him baptized and announced to him: "You were born a Baptist, you were raised a Baptist, but now you are a Catholic." The men were most relieved, that their biggest Lenten temptation had been resolved. The next year's Lenten season rolled around. The first Friday of Lent came, and just at supper time, when the neighborhood was setting down to their tuna fish dinner, came the wafting smell of steak cooking on a grill. The neighborhood men could not believe their noses! WHAT IS GOING ON? They called each other up and decided to meet over in John's yard to see if he had forgotten it was the first Friday of Lent. The group arrived just in time to see John standing over his grill with a small pitcher of water. He was sprinkling some water over his steak on the grill, saying, "You were born a cow, you were raised a cow, but now you are a fish."

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