

The Great Dialogue
3rd Sunday of Lent (A)
(Jn 4:5-42)

In one brief conversation, Jesus brings the Samaritan woman from an attitude of skepticism and sarcasm (where she had nothing), to an attitude of faith (where she possessed salvation). Her religion went from a worship which was false, to authentic worship of God *in Spirit and Truth*. She came to the well thirsty, in the heat of day to draw water; she left without her water jar, more than satisfied.

What Jesus accomplished in one conversation, the Church seeks to accomplish across the centuries, because the Samaritan woman represents mankind who is lost in sin, and thirsty for God. And so in each age the Church begins a dialogue with the world, leading people to the living waters of the Gospel, which alone quench man's deepest thirst.

There are four stages in this conversation, and in each stage the woman comes to know Jesus more clearly. When the dialogue begins, she sees only a Jewish man, with whom she has nothing in common ("*you are a Jew. How can you ask me, a Samaritan and a woman, for a drink*"). Her words reveal an attitude of doubt, and her question is full of sarcasm. But Jesus responds with an invitation to know God's gift of living water, challenging her skepticism.

This is the same with the Church and the world. We have something to offer, but the world is skeptical and cynical. We are treated with sarcasm, but we must respond with a spiritual challenge. Today the world might have sophisticated water and plumbing systems that make it easier than ever to "draw water," but is mankind any better off spiritually? Or are we seeking more than ever for meaning and purpose?

The pattern of the woman questioning, and Jesus challenging, continues throughout the great dialogue. From initial skepticism, the woman acquires respect for Jesus, who has shown respect for her by recognizing her as a spiritual person with spiritual need, and not merely as an impersonal stranger whose only purpose is to labor and draw water at a well. She now addresses him as "Sir" ("*Sir, you do not even have a bucket, and the cistern is deep*"). Her words now reveal an honest question, a real desire to seek spiritual answers. Jesus once again challenges her to find that water which will forever quench one's thirst, pointing out how the water of the world always leaves one thirsty again.

In her dialogue with the world, once a mutual respect is established, the Church points out how nothing in the world can *really* satisfy the longing of the human heart, yet the heart will not rest until it has found the object of its deep desire. The world says to the Church, "you don't really claim to have the ultimate answer, that would be arrogant." But the Church boldly and *authoritatively* need to say yes: "*Whoever drinks from the source of grace in the Church will never thirst.*"

Now the woman is stirred inside. Her questions have changed from sarcasm and challenge to positive interest and petition: *“Give me this water, Sir.”* She not only respects Jesus, but recognizes in him a higher authority, a role which Jesus exercises by challenging her morally, with regard to her marriages. In this third stage of the dialogue, the woman has passed from an attitude of doubt to respect and trust, the recognition of God’s authority: *“Sir, I can see you are a prophet.”*

And so with the Church and the world. After the initial invitation and argument about how little the world can offer the soul, the Church issues the call to conversion. On a personal level the woman had five false husbands. But as a pagan Samaritan, her five husbands represent the five “Baals” or false gods worshipped by the Canaanites. The Church’s call to conversion is not simply a challenge to leave behind sinful personal relationships, but more deeply the call to leave behind the false gods of the world that are worshipped through promiscuity, consumerism, hedonism, and relativism.

In the fourth part of the dialogue the woman recognizes Jesus not just as a prophet, but as the Messiah—the one anointed by God, who will reveal the full truth about God. Her attitude has become one of faith, and her questioning is now a desire for true worship, which neither Jerusalem of the Jews nor Shechem of the Samaritans provide. True worship is found in Jesus himself: *“I who speak to you am he.”*

Likewise, the Church is also revealed in the world as the one filled with the Holy Spirit of truth. The Church is the fount of grace, and in her is found authentic worship in Spirit and Truth. The presence of the Holy Spirit in the sacraments provides us with the wellsprings – the living waters – of eternal life. And by her teaching authority the Church proclaims the full Truth about salvation.

To worship in Spirit and Truth is to worship neither in Jerusalem nor Shechem, but in the catholicity of the Church.

The Samaritan woman came to the well thirsty and left satisfied. Jesus came to the well tired, hungry, and thirsty, and left refreshed. In neither case was it the well-water that did the work. The woman experienced Grace: the waters of eternal life. Jesus experienced her faith, and he was satisfied: *“Doing the will of Him who sent me and bringing His work to completion is my food.”*

May the Lord lead us to deeper faith and authentic worship within his Church, and may this faith which reaches out to others bring him relief from his thirst.