

March 27, 2011
The Revd Canon Robert D. Edmunds

The Third Sunday of Lent
St. George's Cathedral, Jerusalem

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts, be ever acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

I am indebted this morning to Herbert O'Driscoll*, a priest of the Church of Canada, who provides us a valuable perspective on this morning's Gospel. The backbone of what I share with you this morning is from his wise and discerning heart.

The well which is such a focus for this morning's drama is still there. The well is covered now by a recently completed church under the careful direction of Fr. Justinian, a devout Greek Orthodox priest whose skill in stained glass is remarkable. He has had the responsibility of protecting this holy site and building the church for many years. He is an amazing saint of God, quiet, short, wispy gray hair, decked out in a well-worn dark gray cassock with a leather belt. You can actually meet him if you visit Jacob's Well in what we now know as Nablus in the northern part of the West Bank. Fr. Justinian is an amazing saint of God protecting a holy site with an amazing story about a well, a woman and Jesus.

It was high noon and a woman came alone to the well for water. Her visit to the well was far from normal, and Jesus knows something is wrong. He asks her for a drink.

The woman is startled. In these first seconds of their encounter two taboos were broken. First, Jews do not speak to Samaritans and secondly, in this circumstance, men do not speak to women. She is from the wrong people and because she is of no blood relation to Jesus, no words should have been spoken.

From the beginning she senses that there is in this man something more than meets the eye. He is not merely asking for a drink; he suggests that he possesses another source of refreshment, another kind of "drink." We too need to listen with her kind of sensitivity as we ourselves encounter Our Lord. He is never offering us just religion, just theology, just church membership. He offers whatever we are thirsty for – inner peace, faith, challenge, meaning, direction.

Jesus and the woman spar with one another as two people do who are taking the measure of one other, each enjoying the encounter. Jesus is quietly and gently persistent; the woman is intrigued but wary. This stranger is suggesting he can give her something though she is not even aware of the thirst of which he speaks. She is also aware that this kind of conversation leads to some level of self-revelation, and she has things to hide.

So have we it all. We are rightfully suspicious of spiritual encounters, spiritual discussion – especially with people we do not know well, let alone strangers. She knows to be careful, and so do we, because all paths in search of what is true and holy involve some degree of confession, some level of self-revelation. Do we all not have secrets we'd rather not have anyone else know about us?

That being said, Jesus knows how valuable it can be when a portion of our spiritual journey can safely be shared with someone, so he suggests she reach for someone in her life to share what she has to offer – Jesus suggests she bring her husband.

For a long moment there is silence and obvious embarrassment. She says simply, “I have no husband.” Merely four words, but there is so much more to her life's story than those four words suggest. And isn't that the way it is. Sooner or later all encounters with Our Lord involve some measure of self-revelation, even if only to ourselves. For a moment, in these times, we see the hidden places, the unacknowledged agenda, the yawning gaps in the fabric of our lives, the places we are torn, broken and confused.

Jesus pauses at her confession. He suggests the truth and she does not deny it; there have been a number of relationships. I find it interesting, it's worth noting, she takes no offense at his approach. Sometimes acknowledging reality can be a relief. Sometimes we even feel grateful to the one who has taken the risk of raising a difficult issue for us, so we might see the truth.

Then the woman does a very human thing – she makes an effort to change the subject. Ironically she chooses religion as a less threatening avenue of conversation than spirituality and relationships. She asks Jesus to give his opinion about the ancient conflict dividing Jews and Samaritans. Jesus gently but firmly refuses to be drawn into a debate on an irrelevant issue.

The woman makes one more effort to escape any more probing questions by suggesting it will be better to think on these things when the Messiah comes. What a great tactic in avoidance behavior – let's talk about this another day, shall we, sometime when we are not so busy? Any time as long as it is not now, because she is threatened at the possibility that this conversation may become overwhelming. This stranger seems to know her better than she knows herself.

Let's talk about this when the Messiah comes. How about that?

Jesus is tenacious, but he is not mean-spirited. He is persistent, but he is not nasty. Even so, he does not allow her any exit in the encounter at the well. Jesus touched her heart; encouraged her to raise her own life to a new place; opened to her a new way; invited her to believe. She is satisfied to wait until the Messiah comes.

Jesus says to her what he says to all of us who encounter him at all of our countless busy noon-hour wells. We, with the woman, find our comfort zone in saying we will wait until the Messiah comes. Jesus, who is persistent, says “I am he, the one who is speaking to you.”

In that moment, with the woman at the well, each of us then must decide, as we pause for a moment, water ladle in hand, what our response to him will be.

In the Name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

*Herbert O'Driscoll, *Emmanuel, Encountering Jesus as Lord*, c. 1992, Cowley Publications