

The Woman at the Well

Revd Douglas Bannerman
Lent 3A, 24th February 2008

Exodus 17:1-7; Psalm 95; Romans 5:1-11; John 4:5-42

Today is not only the third Sunday in Lent; it is also National Crackpot Day. So I wish to share with you a story sent by a friend to all her other crackpot friends.

A woman used to make the long journey to the well every day to fetch water for herself and her family. She had two earthenware pitchers slung on a yoke with which to carry the water.

One of the pots, the newer one, was a rich red colour, nicely glazed and well shaped. The other was a sort of grubby brown, flecked, chipped and cracked from a lifetime of use. A matter of particular shame for the brown pot was the fact that by the time they all got back from the well, it had lost half its water through its cracks. The newer pot was rather proud of itself because it never spilled a drop. After a number of years the brown pot spoke to the woman of its shame and distress because it could not properly do what it was made to do.

The woman replied, "Have you ever noticed that the ground on your side of the path is covered in flowers?"

This story, like today's gospel, is many layered. But the layer to which I draw your attention was inspired for me by the riveting line penned by St John (4:11):

"The woman said to him, "Sir, you have no bucket."

The crackpot story and the gospel story have reminded me that we tend define ourselves, and others, in one of two ways: either by individual actions or by overall ways of living. Alas, poor Yorick! How do you fare on this matter of defining others according to their actions alone, or, equally destructive, defining yourself according to your actions alone. I can't say that I score too well on this. My initial reactions tend to be like the Samaritan woman. "But sir, you have no bucket." The woman has, initially at any rate, missed the mark.

One of the habits of social process seems to be a sort of revisionist thing that slowly narrows down or changes the meaning of words.

For example, in the 11th century, the word *silly* meant *blessed* or *happy*; but this changed over the centuries through *pious*, *innocent*, *harmless*, *pitiable*, *feeble*, and *feeble minded*, before finally ending up with its current meaning, *foolish* or *stupid*. Conversely, in the late 13th century, the word *nice* meant *stupid* or *foolish* but changed over time through *wanton*, *extravagant*, *elegant*, *strange*, *modest*, *thin*, and *shy*. By the middle of the 18th Century *nice* had gained its current meaning of *pleasant* and *agreeable*.

Social constructionists tell us that words themselves construct society as much as society constructs words. Changes in meaning can sometimes have undesirable fruits. Closer to home, changes in the meanings of words within the culture of Western Christianity have sometimes caused us to miss the mark.

One of my pet dislikes is the manner in which the word "sin" is applied nowadays. Three centuries of change have left us with a meaning that threatens to define us by our actions alone.

If I understand this correctly, our word "sin" derives ultimately from the Hebrew word "cHata", which is related much more closely to a lifestyle perspective than individual actions. The related biblical Greek word "hamartia" (ἁμαρτία) entered the lexicon when Greek influence was at its height in the Middle East. Alexander and all that.

Later, however, the Roman world took this term to mean “missing the mark” in a variety of contexts such as archery contests. In modern archery contests, the archers have to approach the target in order to see where on the target the arrow hit. I gather that in Roman times, they had a slave to stand in a trench close to the target. If the archer missed the mark, the slave would shout, “hamartia!” Occasionally, I suspect, the slave would also cry “Ouch!” Here the connotation of the word has been confined slightly, but not to the extent it is today. In today’s world “sin” seems to mean an individual action. “Sinner,” at least when used as a defining expression takes on a more sinister aspect in this light. The connotation of missing the mark has been completely lost.

One of the greatest injustices done in the name of “sinner” has been the way the Western Church managed to portray Mary Magdalene as a prostitute, a “sinner.” Ooooooh dear! There is not a shred of evidence in the gospels to even remotely suggest that Mary Magdalene was a prostitute. Yet even in a novel published last year she is thus portrayed; and the popular press likewise stubbornly refuses to be educated.

So back to the woman at the well.

“Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water?”

Well of course he had not a bucket. Men did not do women’s work. But that is beside the point. This is a story, not a history. And the story is not about well water. It is about something ineffable, undefinable, ungraspable; something that words will only confine and distort. The author of the 13th century book “The Cloud of Unknowing” was well aware of this.

The woman later said, “When he [Messiah] comes, he will proclaim all things to us.” To which Jesus responded, “I am he.” If Jesus had been carrying a bucket, I don’t think the rest of the story would have been the same.

That great teller of stories, the late Tony de Mello, once wrote:

The master’s sermon consisted of one enigmatic sentence. With a wry smile he said, “All I do is sit on the river bank selling river water.” I was so busy buying the water that I failed to see the river.

The woman at the well initially failed to see the water of life. The grubby pot failed to see the grace arising from its way of life. It is all around us, staring us in the face.

The Spirit and the bride say “Come!”

Let everyone who listens say “Come!”

Let all those who are thirsty come.

All who want may have the water of life and have it free.

Amen.

Come Lord Jesus (The Revelation to John 22:17)