

Commentary on the Gospel for Sun, Mar 23rd 2014

“. . . the love of God has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us” (Rom 5:5).

Paul, a zealous Pharisee, was on a journey to persecute the followers of Jesus in Damascus when he encountered Jesus for the first time. The gift of the Holy Spirit was poured into Paul’s heart, totally unexpected and totally unmerited. So dramatic was this experience for Paul that later he refers to it as a “new creation.”

Human beings thirst for God. The thirst for water becomes a symbol for the thirst for God. The symbol of water resonates beautifully with the love of God "poured out" into Paul’s heart through the Holy Spirit! The symbol of water runs throughout today’s readings.

Moses, in the first reading, strikes the rock and water flows. The Hebrew people were dying of thirst in their wandering in the desert after the Exodus from Egypt. They complained to Moses and Moses cried out to the Lord. The Lord responded, “Strike the rock, and water will flow from it for the people to drink.”

Unexpected and unmerited the Hebrews were saved from death by God by the gift of water.

Jesus, in the Gospel of John, encounters a Samaritan woman; the encounter occurs, significantly, at a watering hole, at Jacob’s Well. Jesus asks her for a drink. She hesitates incredulous that a Jew and male would ask her a Samaritan and a female for a drink -- Jews typically despise and shun Samaritans. Jesus assures her that he will give her “living water”: “Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again; but whoever drinks the water I shall give will never thirst; the water shall give will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.”

Touched deeply by Jesus, the woman spreads the word to her fellow Samaritans. And the gospel tells us that many Samaritans came to believe in him.

God comes to the Samaritans, unexpected and unmerited.

We are all -- like the Jews wandering in the desert and like the Samaritan woman -- in desperate need for God! We are needy human beings wandering in the desert of our often secular and materialistic culture. But we have been invited into a new relationship with God through the gift of the Holy Spirit poured into our hearts.

And Lent is the liturgical season that invites us to plumb our emptiness and alienation from God and to return to Jesus. Like water from the rock reviving the Jews wandering in the desert, like living water from Jacob's well promised to the Samaritan women, we acknowledge our thirst and pray with Paul that the love of God may be poured more fully into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.

The Jesuit poet Gerard Manly Hopkins catches our thirst, "Mine, O thou lord of life, send my roots rain."

Unexpected and unmerited, God will give us the grace promised by our anointing on Ash Wednesday: "Turn away from your sins and be faithful to the Gospel."

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