



Equipes Notre-Dame

The Samaritan Woman at the Well (John 4: 1-42)

“If you only knew what God is offering”

Introduction

Using these words of Jesus from the story of the Samaritan woman at the well let us try to understand their true meaning and to acknowledge the Holy Spirit's challenges in our own time. As we reflect on this passage may we discover God's purpose and the Holy Spirit's renewing power. Perhaps the future course of our own spiritual journey could draw inspiration from this image. The times in which we live, with its challenges, needs and omens, can be read, understood and realized, if we can realise God's presence and his plan for us.

Although challenging us, the reality in which we live shouldn't stifle our hope. Our time is the time of the Covenant of God, of the "greater and greater" God, who goes beyond our wishes with his gifts to us. The times in which we live demand that we do not delay. God is talking to us in each new situation and challenge. New realities require new answers. These answers have to be well rooted in our daily and real life, but they have also to derive from and be nourished by contact with God's wisdom, with the Word that arrives to us from Him and enlightens, provokes, educates, cleanses, leads and offers new inspirations. It is time to listen to His voice. The time we are living is not among the best ones, but not even among the worst ones. **It is our time:** the time that has been given to us to live and to face with a faith that acts with love and makes it possible to hope.

In this reading, we are led to a meeting with the mystery of Christ. This encounter with Him can't be explained simply. Through the words that reveal the needs of the Samaritan woman, the mystery is disclosed of Him who has bent down to us in order to raise us to the Father's glory. From the deep need for water, that involves Jesus too, the woman is raised to the role of missionary and witness. From being lonely and intimidated due to her situation, she becomes a promoter of a community that doesn't gather around her experiences or weaknesses, but around Him "who has told me everything I ever did". To the Samaritan woman we entrust the task of following and leading us to that particular kind of love called marriage. The Samaritan woman is nameless, maybe to remind us that her name could be our name and her thirst our thirst that leads us to the source of love: Jesus.

The passage, through its various dialogues, shows us Jesus close to mankind, walking in our footsteps. The scene shows Jesus walking with his disciples and stopping by the well waiting in anticipation for thirsty mankind. The scene is introduced by the verb "he had" to pass through Samaria. The verb expresses, on one hand, Jesus' will to evangelise Samaria too and, on the other, his obedience to His Father's will. Jesus' presence and the good news of the

Kingdom are true, but their acceptance and understanding depend upon transformation of the person. The passage is in fact characterized by Jesus' growing revelation of Himself and the greater and greater discovery of Him, first by the Samaritan woman, then by the disciples and, in the end, by the people of the village. The various characters recognize Him to the extent that they let themselves be transformed.

The meeting occurs in an ordinary situation, caused by needs of hunger, rest and thirst. It is similar to meetings in our own daily lives; it is an opportunity for formation and growth, but meetings can also transform.

1. Have there been times when you have delayed? How did that feel at the time? How do you feel about it now?
2. On what occasions did you recognise that God was calling you to do something you "had" to do?
3. What meetings have been significant in your life?

"Jesus, tired after his journey, sat down by the well" (John 4: 6)

Submission to the Father's will is tiring. Jesus has accepted it fully, now he feels tired and therefore sits down by the well. John uses an ambiguous preposition (by) to define the place where Jesus is seated. It may mean the little wall enclosing the well, but it may also mean on or around the well, or even that Jesus himself is the well. Furthermore he gives us the time: it was about the sixth hour (noon). The information about the place where Jesus is seated and the time makes us think of the moment when Pilate shows Jesus as "your king", also at the sixth hour (John 19: 13). It seems almost to allude to a royal enthronement.

The image of the well is very popular in the Scriptures and in the writings of the Fathers of the Church. Remember that in the Old Testament, marriages are arranged around wells: Abraham's servant arranges for Isaac's wedding by the well, Jacob meets Rachel by the well, Moses meets his future wife by the well. The reference to the well is highly nuptial. We are in a symbolic world.

Nevertheless the well, is above, all the well of the Scriptures. They are the living water that puts man and God in touch. Whoever wants to fill himself with the Holy Spirit has to be assiduous with the Scriptures.

"Isaac reopened the wells that had been dug by his Father Abraham" (Gen 26: 18)

In the patriarchs' story, and above all with regard to Isaac, it is underlined

that, as the Philistines envied Isaac who could fully utilize the wells he dug, they used to fill the wells with earth, trying to make them useless. According to Origen of Alexandria, the wells are made useless by those who want to trouble the waters with their carnal worries of heretical self-affirmation: discernment is necessary in drawing water.

Origen says: *"Let us not stop digging wells of living water with Isaac, even if the Philistines besiege us and quarrel with us. Let us try not to get tired of digging wells with him, so that of us too one can say: You drink water from your water-jars and from your wells. And let us try to dig so much as to be superabundant in water, so that the knowledge of the Scriptures be useful not only to us but also to the education of others, and men and flocks can drink "*.

Origen advises: *"The Philistines' sin is very serious, but it is just as serious to let us become discouraged by their polluting fury and to stop digging wells with the patriarchs mentioned in the book of Genesis "*.

The fact that some people trouble the waters and claim that the meaning of the Scriptures is only literal should however not prevent us from digging, from going on discerning; looking for the living water that always hides itself in those wells.

Origen's recall of Isaac's perseverance in digging wells to overcome the polluting actions of the Philistines encourages us always to be in search of new wells from which to draw water. Father Caffarel's thirst, his questioning of the Church about the richness of marriage, initiates our prophetic longing in today's world. Where to dig, where to draw, to whom to give the living water of conjugal love? Origen points clearly to the Scriptures as the place to dig; but not exclusively, on the contrary he urges to dig also in the story of mankind, in the life of the Church and, we can add, in Father Caffarel's charism.

The problem of polluted sources with regard to Christian life, conjugal love and the mission of Christians in the Church, is certainly exceptionally large. It is obvious that, in a society that opens itself to comparison with other cultures, this problem has to be evaluated with objectivity but also lived with the right attitude of the believer. It is hope that should guide us and, above all, the greater and greater awareness that it is the path of dialogue, of peace and, consequently, of conscious and faithful attitudes that will allow us to be reliable witnesses in the world.

1. When spiritual tiredness overtakes us, by what means can we be re-energised?
2. Who or what are the modern day Philistines that would prevent us from

accessing the living water offered by Jesus?

3. What means can we employ to help us persevere in finding “unpolluted sources”?

"A Samaritan woman came to draw water" (John 4: 7)

In her daily trip to the well, the Samaritan woman meets the mysterious character who is also in need: He is thirsty but hasn't got a water-jar to draw water. The woman's tiring daily trip to draw water makes her ready to meet another person's need. This woman's story, marked by so many faults, is not an obstacle to the meeting with Jesus. In our own lives we run across many human failings in various aspects of life. When we touch on the themes of marriage and family, we find an endless series of deficits in different cultures; this reading seems to tell us not to run aground on them, but to seek the truth that comes from Jesus. To the extent that we meet him, we are transformed by him. But we are nevertheless told that we have to abandon complaining and truly open ourselves to Him who knows us in the depth of our being.

The Samaritan woman who carries out her daily task of drawing water from the well urges us not to keep inside us the wounded relationships of our conjugal life. It is necessary to have the courage to live the tiredness of daily life and the courage to meet Christ. If, on one hand, we need to sit down by the well (Jesus), on the other, in our service of responsibility inside the Teams Movement, she urges us to sit down near other men and women who need living water. We are not the keepers of a method, but brothers and sisters who, on the road of life, converse calmly and without prejudice, without taking into account time and prestige. She calls us to share the passion for the living water that is present in each one of us "my soul is thirsty for you". We are invited to leave the "water-jar" of our rigid structures to join the searchers for God that we meet on our way. Under the impulse of the Spirit who will guide us into all the truth (John 16: 13), new characteristics are emerging with regard to conjugal life. Amid the anguish and hopes of people, particularly of the weakest and least, a greater and greater need is felt to be rooted in Christ, New models of union are being defined that can't possibly be put under the aegis of the sacrament of marriage. We have to take the Gospel as our first rule and brotherhood as the design and future for our unjust and divided society, living a deep love for mankind with great imagination and creativity. The experience of being amongst the poorest and most excluded people gives a new shape to conjugal life. How many spouses have bent under the numberless wounds of families, the marginalised and the whole of society? Among these hidden weaknesses, the witness of the spouses and their families holds out a light.

1. On what occasions have we believed our faults to be a barrier to meeting Jesus?
2. Have there been times in our lives when Jesus was thirsting for us?
3. How do we equate the new models of union with Jesus' teaching to love our neighbour?

"If you only knew what God is offering" (John 4: 10)

The Samaritan woman's meeting with Jesus reminds us that the person who is waiting for us by the well knows us in depth. Our effort can't be only voluntary. We have to learn to know God's gift that acts in us. There are signs of its presence, but he is waiting for our willingness. He urges us to new answers with creative and imaginative vigour. Where does the Spirit lead us today?

- **To know in depth and in truth.** A first approach concerns his Word. It nourishes all aspects of our life: prayer, work, Church, society... The rediscovery of spirituality, the return to the sources of our Movement can only refresh us. Of course we should not get lost in research into the past but rediscover the Movement's propulsive force.
- **To let desire arise through the passion for meeting brothers and sisters.** There are innumerable initiatives that start from an exchange between cultures, between generations. It is necessary to discover the richness existing in other ways of living together. This richness may be found in other cultures, in other religions or perhaps even in our families, with different ways of living and understanding married life. These encounters need creativity and clear-sightedness, but also perseverance; we should not let ourselves be gripped by fashion. God's gift and its richness have ways that are often surprising.
- **Ecclesiastical dimension: from solitude to communion.** The signs of the Spirit's vitality require that we know how to express our life in the Church with a new language and a new reality. Conjugal life can be a laboratory of new models of making Church; in prayer, in evangelisation, in ecclesiastical communion. The language of love in which spouses are expert has to find new, less stereotyped, forms of expression. It can help the Church to combine mission and spirituality, body and spirit, community and individuality. Some symbols and symbolic languages can be replaced by new forms of communication that are more suited to contemporary culture.

1. In what aspects of our lives have we become stuck? How can we find new answers?
2. How closely does your team follow the founding charisms of Father Caffarel? How could it improve?
3. In what ways could we do more to witness our married spirituality within the Church?

"Believe me" (John 4: 21)

In this passage, we hear the words that Jesus addresses to the characters and see his creative and re-creative effect on them. He is the true protagonist and leads the scene; he plans the strategies of the meeting. The Samaritan woman, like embryonic clay, is patiently shaped little by little and, as the first Adam received God's breath and was changed into a living being (Gen 2: 7), the woman receives the water of life.

In the dialogue with the woman, Jesus shows Himself now as a good shepherd, now as a friend, now as a master. The meeting with Him moulds, in a new way, the clay that has become chaos. The forming of this woman doesn't go through a sterile methodology, but through a deep relationship that touches the most intimate chords of life. Therefore, this formative meeting doesn't prove to be a distant reality, a methodology to be accepted, but a renewed relationship.

Jesus' formative action is not limited to the Samaritan woman; it reaches the disciples, who are suspicious of this mysterious meeting. They are invited to raise their eyes to the fields that are ripe for harvest. They are above all invited to understand what the real food is: "the Father's will".

Our Teams formation sessions should always have these ramifications. They should not be reduced to interventions aimed to safeguard the Teams methods, but should be strategies able to be in synergy with people, in order to strengthen already existing positive relationships and, at the same time, in order to propose strategies for meeting new demands for relationship.

1. At this time, how do you see Jesus – as a good shepherd, friend, master, or someone else? Why is that?
2. On what occasions have you failed to “raise your eyes to the fields ripe for harvest”?

3. What has been your experience of Teams formation? What could be done to improve it?

“When he comes he will tell us everything” (John 4: 25)

The reality that challenges us and the obstacles that paralyse us have to be enlightened by the light and the strength of the Word of God. "From frequent reading of God's Word we derive the necessary light for individual and conjugal discernment that helps us to look, in the signs of our times, for the ways of the Lord". The Word helps us to discern God's will - what is good, acceptable and perfect - and his ways in the signs of the times, and to act with faithfulness and wisdom.

The episode of the dialogue with the Samaritan woman in John is placed in the context of other reactions to Jesus: the reaction of the Jew Nicodemus, who wants to know clearly, but offers resistance, partly because of his scepticism (John 3: 1-21); the reaction of the Samaritan woman, who lets herself be fascinated and guided (John 4: 1-42) and the reaction of the court official, who is converted with all his family (John 4: 46-54).

Traditionally, chapter 4 of John's gospel is regarded as a great baptismal catechesis. Along the path of her life, the Samaritan woman meets Jesus. He is tired by his journey and is seated by Jacob's well; driven by love of God the Father, facing the prejudices and the taboos of his time (John 4: 27), he begins a conversation with the woman and asks her for some water. Confronted with the woman's initial resistance, Jesus doesn't get angry; the conversation develops through seven answers given by the woman and seven sentences by Jesus. The dialogue touches the heart of both of them. Jesus himself feels deeply involved, asks her to believe Him and talks to her of the true worship in spirit and in truth (John 4: 23-24). He goes even as far as to confide His most intimate secret and announces to her that He is *"the Messiah who is coming"* (John 4: 26). The woman immediately feels the strength of His words and the deep attraction of His person. She progressively discovers the mystery of this man, who offers her living water **and** the chance of a new relationship with God, well beyond the institutionalised worship practiced either on the mountain or in the synagogue.

This woman brings with her a story of wounded relations. Perhaps she goes to the well at an unusual time not to be seen. She certainly knows some religious practices, but she needs something new and deeper. When she finds it, she becomes another person. The void of her life is symbolized by the water-jar. Jesus feels the inner discomfort caused to her by her past. He discloses himself while, little by little, revealing the woman's anxiety. She changes, passing from irony to an attraction that disarms her, from her void to fullness that arouses her enthusiasm.

She becomes meditative and confident because the mysterious master doesn't condemn her, but speaks to her with new words that go directly to her heart, thirsting for intense relationship. The meeting with Jesus changes her into a messenger: she runs to the town and calls her fellow citizens announcing to them a "Messiah", who knows without condemning and directs their thirst towards the water welling up for eternal life (John 4: 39). The water-jar, symbol of the human thirst and of relationships that have never satisfied her, is now useless - she leaves it (John 4: 28). In the meantime Jesus announces to his disciples that the fields are already ripe for harvest (John 4: 35-38). The woman kindles faith in Jesus and takes her fellow citizens to him (John 4: 39).

In this biblical narration we discover the image of our vocation - the experience of meeting Jesus and an engagement to announce the Gospel. In the place of the meeting - completely deprived of sacred signs, the dialogue opens the heart to the truth; it discloses and cures. In Jesus, God shows Himself frail and thirsty. God's thirst meets with the woman's thirst, with our thirst. The person who asks for water is ready to offer a new and eternal water that regenerates and transforms life. Jesus doesn't fear mankind's anxiety. His calm and inner freedom allows mankind, represented by the woman, to feel the protagonist, to experience its own anxiety until it finds the living water welling up for eternal life. Jesus' thirst and the woman's thirst lead to a liberating dialogue, healing inner wounds that were until then incurable and that racial and religious prejudices have made more painful. God's "needy" love in Jesus asks us - anxious mankind - for water and offers us the water of life for free.

We can see ourselves mirrored in the woman; many times we too are actually hurt in our mutual relationships, we are thirsty for truth and authenticity. We discover that we are unable to understand our emotions, behind which our bewildered heart hides itself. Meditating on this text, we can enlighten our life with the Word. Jesus likes simple and ordinary circumstances of life that can be changed into special moments of grace and revelation. The skill in inviting this woman, who has a sordid story, amazes us; in the meantime, it teaches us to have confidence in small things and in limited resources. The prejudices of the disciples in watching this scene (John 4: 26-27) reveal a male chauvinist mentality that is still present today. Jesus' serenity, derived from the clear awareness of His mission, allows Him to patiently wait for the right question and for the time of complete trust. The disciples go back to the town to buy something to eat; the woman goes back to the town alone, but she will get many Samaritans to follow the path of faith in the "Saviour of the world" (John 4: 39-42).

1. Who do you most identify with – Nicodemus, the Samaritan woman, the court official, or none of these? Why is that?
2. In what ways can you be a messenger for Christ?

3. What aspects of your life or relationships have you held onto for too long?

"The woman put down her water-jar and went away to the town" (John 4: 28)

The Samaritan woman, transformed by the meeting with Jesus, leaves her water-jar, a sign of what comforted her, and sets out promptly towards a new reality. Having overcome the shame of her situation, she is not afraid of announcing: "I have seen somebody who told me everything I ever did". The experience of this change can be summed up as follows:

- **The experience of God.** We are witnesses of Christ, of his passionate love towards mankind. The bedrock of our experience is for us to be a living community, a mirror of Him. We have therefore to ask ourselves what changes need to be carried out in order that this may be more and more true and more and more visible.
 - **Witnesses in daily life.** Where we live is the place waiting for our witness. By spreading our Movement all over the world, the Spirit pushes us to diversify and to revitalize ourselves, but also to seek ways of unity and of a richer and richer communion. Our spread across the world requires that the service structures of the Movement are consistent, but also that we find new ways to receive richness and make communion grow.
 - **Rediscovery of sexuality and of its richness.** The Samaritan woman, with her stormy sexual past, is helped to arrive at the deepest love that quenches her thirst. In the current chaos of false ways of living, conjugal life has a very precise role, inside and out of the family.
 - **Rediscovery of a just and more solid life.** Father Caffarel has taught us that, if we want to have assurance for the future, we have to live our life as a service. Everyday we have to find ways to intercede in thirsty people's needs. It is a delicate task and as Teams couples we need to remember of what we have received and make it grow in today's world.
 - **The path of ecumenical sharing.** Our family life, a place of communion, has to open its eyes to the need of communion and unity in the Church.
1. What can we do to make conjugal life a credible and living proposition for today's world?
 2. How can we respond to thirsty peoples' needs? In what ways have others responded to our own thirst?
 3. What can we do as individuals, as couples, as team members to advance the path to ecumenism?

Conclusion

Conjugal life is going through a time of transition, but our hearts are on fire, they continue to be thirsty and we keep looking for the living water. This happens when we are able to listen to Him who speaks to us along our way. We then experience a passionate love for Jesus and an equal passion for our brothers and sisters. We are then able to meet Him and to recognize Him publicly as the "*saviour of the world*" (John 4: 42). We know very well that this fire can become more intense or fainter, can grow or diminish, proliferate or become isolated. It can also be extinguished.

We don't want to remain in a "glorious past". We want to look to the future, where the Holy Spirit casts us to do still great things with us. We are not interested in defending presumed acquired rights, but in serving more and better, being faithful to our vocation to love. In this way we cleanse ourselves and acquire a new productiveness. So we become credible in a Church that is born again in this "*novo millenio ineunte*". It's a serious and urgent assignment.