

16. January 2025

THE GOSPEL OF ST. JOHN
“The woman by the well”

Jn 4:1-15

Now when the Lord knew that the Pharisees had heard that Jesus was making and baptizing more disciples than John (although Jesus himself did not baptize, but only his disciples), he left Judea and departed again to Galilee. He had to pass through Samar'ia. So he came to a city of Samar'ia, called Sy'char, near the field that Jacob gave to his son Joseph. Jacob's well was there, and so Jesus, wearied as he was with his journey, sat down beside the well. It was about the sixth hour. There came a woman of Samar'ia to draw water. Jesus said to her, “Give me a drink.” For his disciples had gone away into the city to buy food. The Samaritan woman said to him, “How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samar'ia?” For Jews have no dealings with Samaritans. Jesus answered her, “If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, ‘Give me a drink,’ you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water.” The woman said to him, “Sir, you have nothing to draw with, and the well is deep; where do you get that living water? Are you greater than our father Jacob, who gave us the well, and drank from it himself, and his sons, and his cattle?” Jesus said to her, “Every one who drinks of this water will thirst again, but whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him will never thirst; the water that I shall give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.” The woman said to him, “Sir, give me this water, that I may not thirst, nor come here to draw.”

On their way from Judea to Galilee, Jesus and His disciples took the shortest route through the land of Samaria. The encounter with the Samaritans was not always pleasant for the Jews of that time, for there were tensions between them. Although the Samaritans also worshipped Yahweh, the Jews regarded them as apostates because they rejected the writings of the prophets and Jewish traditions. There was also a dispute over the proper place to worship God, for the Samaritans had built a temple complex for Yahweh on Mount Gerizim, while the Jews worshipped Him in the temple in Jerusalem.

Jesus, tired from His long journey, sat down to rest by Jacob's well and saw a Samaritan woman come to draw water. The Lord did not hesitate to speak to her, even though she was a Samaritan and a woman. It was customary for rabbis to be reserved in their dealings with women. But Jesus knew what a great gift He wanted to give to her and to the Samaritans. So He began by asking her to give Him something to drink.

You can see from the woman's reaction how unusual it was for Him to ask her. And then the Lord turned the conversation to the spiritual level, for in reality it was He who wanted to offer her living water. By first asking her for this small gesture of giving Him something to drink, she had the opportunity to receive the reward of a prophet; moreover, the reward of the Son of God. In exchange for the water that temporarily quenched His physical thirst, He would give her an abundance of water that would quench her spiritual thirst forever.

Like Nicodemus, the Samaritan woman did not understand the Lord at first. Indeed, to understand the language of Jesus requires the light of God to move from an earthly vision to a supernatural perspective. This usually requires a process, a journey, which the Lord began with this woman, knowing that she would not understand Him at first.

But already with His first words, linked to an earthly reality, Jesus sowed the seed for her to recognise Him later on. Jacob's well is 32 metres deep and always contains groundwater. It is therefore 'living water' in earthly terms. This term certainly resonated with the woman when Jesus said it. She had not yet fully grasped it when the Lord told her that He could give her living water, to which she responded by asking Him to give it to her so that she would no longer have to come to the well to draw it. But the Lord went further:

"The water that I shall give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life."

We now know what Jesus meant: it is the grace of God, the Spirit of the Lord, that works in us and can become a spring of water. Later in John's Gospel, on the last day of the feast in Jerusalem, the Lord will say: *"He who believes in me, as the scripture has said, 'Out of his heart shall flow rivers of living water.' Now this he said about the Spirit, which those who believed in him were to receive; for as yet the Spirit had not been given, because Jesus was not yet glorified"* (Jn 7:38-39).

This is where Jesus wants to lead the Samaritan woman, and to help her understand, He addresses another word to her that must have moved her: *“If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, ‘Give me a drink,’ you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water.”* (Jn 7:38-39).

Jesus delicately directs the conversation to Himself: *“If you knew who it is who says to you...”*

The woman sensed something, for she asked Him: *“Are you greater than our father Jacob?”*

And the conversation does not end there... Tomorrow we continue!