

3rd Lent 2011

Fr. Bob VerEecke, S.J.

Amidst all the headlines about the continuing nuclear threat in Japan, the devastation there, the air strikes in Libya, and the continued unrest in the Middle East, another story that appeared on the front page of the Times and Globe was the announcement of the death of Elizabeth Taylor. You may need to be at least as old as I am to have ever heard of this film star. In the articles about Ms. Taylor's long career as a screen actress, there was more than a fleeting mention of her private life. It seems like you can't write about this person without mentioning that she has been married eight times.

Whether she was a great actress, a person who supported worthy causes during her lifetime, what really defined her, what her life was really about were those eight husbands. I mention this in the context of today's story of the woman at the well. I overheard someone say, "Elizabeth Taylor, she had more husbands than the Samaritan Women!"

There is an underlying suspicion about the Woman at the Well when we hear about her "five husbands." It may be our prurient interest but this startling revelation of five husbands often draws our attention more than anything else in the story. The fact that this Samaritan woman is engaging in a theological conversation with Jesus, holding her own as she outlines Samaritan beliefs or her willingness to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, leave her water jar, like other disciples in the scriptures who leave their nets, their Father etc. and become the first evangelizer to the Samaritan people, all of these important elements of this story are often of little interest in comparison to the revelation of her colorful life of intimate relations. She had five husbands! Or did she?

Today we begin to hear the first of three long scripture passages from John's gospel that are deeply symbolic and cannot be read as historical accounts. The truth of these three stories of the Woman at the Well, The Man Born Blind and the Raising of Lazarus is that they are Revelatory texts: that is they reveal who Jesus is and those who comes to have faith in him. If we are to really understand them, we need to go to the "well" of scriptural scholarship and draw from the well of wisdom and drink freely of the knowledge and insight these scholars offer us. The Woman at the well is one of those biblical texts that can truly lead us to the "living water" who is Jesus himself but we have to be willing to go to the well, lower our buckets and draw water from the streams of salvation.

The most compelling interpretation of this passage, one in which the Samaritan woman is revealed as disciple- missionary and not as a woman of dubious moral character is the work of Sandra Schneiders.

In her exegesis of this passage, scripture scholar Schneiders invites us to rethink this passage in a way that sees the Woman at the Well as the first woman in John's gospel to profess her faith in Jesus as the messiah, the savior of the world. She will be followed by Martha, Mary and Mary Magdalene in later scripture narratives. Schneiders sees this unnamed woman as one of the many symbolic characters in John's gospel. As she says, "Very often the symbolic characters in John (the Mother of Jesus, the Beloved Disciple, the Royal Official, the Paralytic at the Pool, the Man Born Blind) are nameless, which enhances their power to represent collectivities without losing their particularities." In this case, it is a woman who represents the whole Samaritan people who come to full acceptance within the Johannine Christian community through their profession of faith in Jesus as the Messiah.

Schneiders does a brilliant analysis of this passage that lets us see it in the light of day and not shrouded in the darkness of sexual innuendo with a preoccupation about this woman's marital history. Her exegesis of the passage is quite the contrary. She sees the story in continuity with other biblical passages where the bridegroom meets his bride at a "well": i.e. Jacob and Rachel. The story is meant to remind those familiar with the Hebrew scriptures not only of the Well stories but also of the image of the Bridegroom and Bride. God binds himself in love to the Bride who is Israel and unfaithful though Israel may be, God is always "wooing" her, calling her back to a relationship of faithful love.

Another important clue for Schneiders is the placement of this story after that of Nicodemus, the Jewish official coming to Jesus under cover of darkness: he leaves confused and unenlightened where she, a Samaritan and a woman encounters, Jesus at High Noon, in the brightest light of the day. She comes to faith in Jesus after a theological discussion where she recognizes him as the promised Messiah while at the same time coming to insight that the Samaritan tradition of Worship is a place now transformed into worship of God through the person of Jesus who is the revelation of God.

And what about those five husbands? For the Samaritan people, the original northern kingdom who were accused of infidelity in the covenant relationship by coming to worship false Gods, this is a call to “return to God with all your heart,” as the prophet Hosea says. In summary, Schneider says, “the entire dialogue between Jesus and the woman is the ‘wooing’ of Samaria to full covenant fidelity in the New Israel, by Jesus the New Bridegroom.”

This morning I have tried to give you little more than a “sip” of the life giving water that this interpretation of the story of the Woman at the Well has been for me and for many others. If you’re interested in going to the well again and drinking more deeply from her wisdom, I can send you the whole article.

Long gospel, long homily. Oh well! And what difference does it make to my Lenten Journey you may ask. What difference does it make for our elect who are going to the well, the baptismal font to receive the living water of the life of Jesus?

First, I would hope that this homily might make you thirsty enough to go to the well to learn more about this familiar scripture passage. Second, I would hope that you, like the Samaritan Woman, would know that you are invited into a relationship of remarkable intimacy with Jesus, the Bridegroom.

Third, I would hope that like the Samaritan Woman you would find the freedom to proclaim: “Come and See the one who told me everything I have ever done/Can he not be the savior of the world?”