

Spiritual food

27 3 11

Almighty God,
whose most dear Son went not up to joy
but first he suffered pain,
and entered not into glory before he was crucified:
mercifully grant that we, walking the way of the cross,
may find it none other than the way of life and peace.

My text today is John chapter 4 and verse 34: 'My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work.'

Last week's gospel told us of an arranged, night-time encounter between Jesus and Nicodemus. Today, we hear of a chance, midday meeting between Jesus and a Samaritan woman at a well outside the Samaritan city of Sychar.

Jesus is tired. With his disciples, Jesus is travelling back from Jerusalem to Galilee. The twelve have gone into town to buy food – safety in numbers – leaving Jesus, weary from the morning's long walk alone, waiting for their return. Jesus is thirsty. He has no convenient, small, plastic bottle of mineral water to hand to quench his thirst and as the Samaritan women will later point out, he lacks the means to draw water from the well so he has no alternative but to sit and wait for his friends to return.

But before they do, a woman appears to fetch water from the well. This is odd. No one would do heavy work at midday when the sun is at its hottest without good reason. Fetching water from the well would be something everyone would normally do early in the morning and then towards sunset to avoid the uncomfortable heat of the day. Unless of course you want to be alone. And then you well might wonder why the company of other women is being avoided. This Jesus would have known and would have noted.

But being tired and thirsty, Jesus breaks the taboo of a Jewish man asking a Samaritan woman for a drink. But it's worse. A rabbi would not allow a woman to touch him, let alone a foreign woman, for fear of being ritually defiled if she were menstruating. And worst of all, Jesus knew and we are to discover that the woman is probably a prostitute with 'five husbands' in the past and the man with whom she is currently living not her husband at all but possibly her pimp, her protector !

The exchange between the two is essentially sharp and comic:

- Jesus asks for water and she expresses her surprise.
- Jesus tells her if only she knew who he was then she would be asking him for something to drink.
- Really – so where's your bucket?
- Drink this well water and you'll need to drink again later but if you drink my water you will never thirst again.
- Okay, so give me some.
- All right but first fetch your husband.

- I don't have one.
- True you've had five and the man you're with isn't your husband.
- Gosh you must a prophet! Then trying to distract Jesus from the uncomfortable truth she floats a theological 'red-herring' which Jesus brushes aside, telling her he is the long-expected Messiah.

The disciples return and the woman leaves, leaving her water jar behind ! Surprised, they offer Jesus food but oddly Jesus is neither hungry nor thirsty since he has been spiritually fed by doing the work he has been sent to do, witnessing to the truth of God.

Back in Sychar the woman causes a stir by telling other Samaritans about Jesus so the townsfolk come out to see for themselves and incredibly invite Jesus to stay with them for a couple of days.

So, in conclusion, let me draw your attention to two vital sources of energy: spiritual food and spiritual drink. As the source of the water of eternal life, Jesus can say not only to the Samaritan woman but to us all: 'Those who drink the water I will give them will never be thirsty' (4 v14). As the bread of life, Jesus can say that not only he but also we can be spiritually fed by doing the will of God which is our text today: 'My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work.' (4 v34) We have no need to be tired or exhausted because there is a limitless store of energy available to us by serving the one we love and who loves us.

And lastly, there is no substitute for personal experience of God. The disciples knew Jesus first-hand. The Samaritan woman had a first-hand encounter with Jesus at the well. Though first told by the unnamed woman, the Samaritans living in Sychar also came to believe in Jesus when they met him for themselves. If we really want to have a vibrant, vital faith then we do need to encounter God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit for ourselves.

I have spoken in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,
Amen.

Preached at the Eucharist

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H: Sermon 23: Spiritual food

