

May 22, 2022 5th Sunday of Pascha The Samaritan Woman  
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1] When I was a teacher of Religious Studies most of my students, of course, came from agnostic, secular homes and non-religious families. They were often amused, sometimes even shocked, when I pointed out to them that the real reason that they were agnostic, or even atheist, was nothing to do with their own free, intellectual choice, but because of the accidents of time and geography; that they would think differently if they came from elsewhere in the world. Clearly, there are peoples and cultures that have preserved the knowledge of God better than others. And there are those who, evidently, have largely lost sight of the Divine Mystery. We live among them, here, in Britain.

2] This might be true in societies at a general level. But when it comes to individuals the dynamics appear very different indeed; general conclusions begin to disappear. In last Monday's gospel reading from St John, we read of Christ saying, 'No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him; and I will raise him up at the last day... Most assuredly, I say to you, he who believes in Me has everlasting life. I am the bread of life.' [Jn.6:44-48] In this morning's gospel we have just heard of such an individual being drawn to God: the encounter between the Samaritan woman and Jesus.

3] In the Anaphora, the great eucharistic prayer of St John Chrysostom, following the offering up and the consecration of the bread and wine, we commemorate the ranks of saints, '...All those who have gone before us to their rest: forefathers, fathers, patriarchs, prophets, apostles, preachers, evangelists, martyrs, confessors ascetics and every righteous spirit made perfect in faith...'

4] The Holy Tradition of the Orthodox Church records among those preachers, evangelists, martyrs, the Samaritan woman of John's gospel, who is known to us as Saint Photini, or as the name implies in Greek, the enlightened one. Following her encounter with Christ, Photini and her household, baptised by the Apostles,

became evangelists of the early Church. Little did Photini know that a seemingly chance encounter during a daily chore was going to turn her life upside down.

5] At some point, each of us must ask him or herself, where we think that our following of Christ is leading? It is all too easy to follow crowds in madness, to be religious for no better reason than that is what we have always done; where we feel secure, even normal; the comfort of identity and belonging. Well! Those things are important in an uncertain world, but they do not lead to our salvation. Photini had all that among her fellow Samaritans at Sychar, near Joseph's Well, where daily she could draw one of the basic elements of life on this planet. But then she encountered the Living Water!

5] For every one of us, the font of our baptism into Christ was our Jacob's Well; the place where we encountered the Living Water. Whether we were but babes-in-arms or fully grown, whether unknowing or fully aware, we were redeemed and had planted within our souls the means of our salvation. As Christ says today, 'The water that I shall give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.'

6] The question, however, is what do we do with this treasure, we who have found the pearl of great price? The parables of Christ in the gospel ask this question of us again and again: the Talents, the wise and foolish Virgins, the Rich fool, the Sower, the lamp stand and the barren fig tree. The mystery is the kingdom of God within each of us. In the gospel parable, the man who finds treasure buried in a field sells all he has to buy that field.

7] The problem is that it is all too easy to be satisfied with half-measures in our devotion, our dedication, our commitment, our zeal for the kingdom of God. In the end, it comes down to a question of faith. Do we really believe that that we can store our true treasure in heaven, or shall we be 'practical;' shall we say, "Yes, yes, but in the real world..." But which is the world of reality? This manifestation, or the mind of God that gives it any substance at all?

8] It is a difficult one, is it not? We with families and jobs and responsibilities must indeed be practical. We have moral duties in this world and no one can suggest that we can just abandon these. In the turbulent and disturbed days of the sixth century, Pope Gregory the Great of the Rome, the Diologist, and the apostle to the English, a man with a deeply spiritual inner life, found himself as the only man in the city who had both the capability and the authority to organise the defences of Rome against barbarian incursions. He hated having to spend his time doing that, but it was he who had to meet the city representatives and officials to provide for the safety of the citizens.

9] Yet we do not have to let our left hand know what our right hand is doing. [cf. Matt: 6:3] There are those, of course, eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom who, like the apostles, have abandoned all and followed Christ. The holy martyrs were called swiftly to their reward; the monastics know where their treasure lies. But what of us who remain in the world and must deal with the world? We, too, can witness to Christ in our lives. If not quite called upon to shed our blood, we are martyrs, witnesses that is, if we live a faithful and chaste married life, bringing up our children in the fear of the Lord; if, when asked by our neighbours about the hope that is in us, we, like Photini in the gospel, can point them toward the way of life, as she told the people of Sychar, 'Come, see a man Who told me all that I ever did. Can this be the Christ?'

10] The early martyrs had to contend against pagan emperors and were required to sacrifice to pagan gods or face death. Although we do not live in those times, we can be martyrs too when we refuse to worship the idol of Mars, and conquer our anger; when we refuse to worship the idol of Venus and overcome the passion of lust; when we put aside avarice and turn to the needs of our neighbour, rather than worship the idols of Pluto and Mercury. We might not be struggling against the great Babylon, imperial Rome, but we shall yet be taking on the demonic powers in our spiritual warfare as warriors of Christ.

11] I can remember a time in this country when going to church was sociable and respectable; when people were almost embarrassed to say they didn't attend church regularly. There were spiritual dangers with that, of course. Now, however, it is easier to see the true witnesses of Christ, for Christianity is largely disparaged; being known as a Christian does not accrue the benefits of political rectitude. So let us rejoice in our lack of respectability in just being here today! For 'Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake. Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven,' (Matt.5:11-12)

12] It must be clear to anyone who seeks the kingdom of God that it entails taking up the way of the Cross. Christianity is an ascetic faith; it teaches that through the grace of God and our own spiritual struggle, we store up our treasure in heaven, where we shall know eternal blessings. If you can find them amidst the uncertainties of chance and circumstance, the world has all sorts of temporary treasures to offer you: riches, fame, power, pleasures, conviviality, possessions, comfort, security, health, self-esteem, leisure, even a kind of glory.

13] Or, on the other hand, we can realise that we cannot be Christian in name only. We can find humility and patience even under suffering, as a holy people consecrated in His Name. If, instead of nominal Christians, we are full-time Christians, strengthened by the Holy Mysteries, praying, fasting, giving as generously as the Lord to all, we shall be found giving glory to God; witnessing to the very Christ Whom we worship.

14] Like Photini, the Samaritan woman, we need to be enlightened: not some secret knowledge of the gnostics or some Buddhist extinction of the self in a state of equilibrium. We are talking here about true repentance, where the soul is awakened by the Holy Spirit to know what God wants of us. Eventually, refusing to renounce Christ, the faith of Photini and her family led them to suffering and death, martyred under the emperor Nero, around the year 66AD.

15] For our part, we, so often sinful and fragmented human beings, can at least refuse to be pulled in two directions at once; that through the portion of grace granted to us in the Holy Gifts, we can, instead, become unified once again, body and soul no longer at variance, our Christianity integral to what we are, and made whole in the Body of Christ.