

14th May 2023
Fr Chrysostom MacDonnell

The Samaritan Woman

1] In the city of Bristol where I was raised, there is a place called Jacob's Wells. It lies in Cliftonwood, on the corner of Constitution Hill and Jacob's Wells Road. The stone structure is built over a natural hot spring of water and is now thought to have been used, originally, for the Jewish ritual cleansing bodies before burial. There was a Jewish community established in Bristol after 1154, and they had a cemetery on nearby Brandon Hill, until their expulsion from England in 1290. On a lintel over the building there is what is thought to be the Hebrew word *zochalim*, which means, flowing. In 1905 the waters were diverted to supply the Hotwells Public Baths, built on Jacob's Wells Road, and were in use until the 1970's.

2] We know that there can be no civilisation without water. But more than that, the very name of Jacob's Wells Road in Bristol connects, of course, with the historical culture of this land. Our civilisation, our language, our literature, our very street names, are rooted in that Judaeo-Christian tradition of Britain. In the 29th chapter of Genesis the patriarch Jacob meets his future wife, Rachel, at the well; the same well referred to in today's gospel, where The woman of Samaria encounters Christ. That source of water was known to her ancestors: a significant place, as they knew that it had been used by Jacob himself. Coming at midday she intends to fulfil a domestic chore, but her whole world is about to change; to be turned upside down.

3] Wednesday, the fourth of Pascha, was the Mid-feast of Pentecost, and we have just heard the words of the troparion of that day, In the midst of this Feast, O Saviour, give Thou my thirsty soul to drink of the waters of true worship; for Thou didst call out to all, saying: Whosoever is thirsty, let him come to Me and drink. Wherefore, O Christ our God, Fountain of life, glory to Thee.

4] There is much that may be said about Christ our God, the Fountain of life: about water itself as the symbol of life, both natural and supernatural; of baptism as the entry into the new life in Christ;

and of ourselves as being refreshed by what the troparion calls the waters of true worship. Such, of course, is Orthodox Christianity itself, where we translate the word Orthodox as meaning not just right belief, but also right glorification and worship: the right way of worshipping what we rightly believe in.

5] In the gospel passage appointed for the feast of Mid-Pentecost, St John tells us that Jesus went up to Jerusalem for Sukkot, the feast of Tabernacles that recalled the time the Israelites had lived a nomadic life under Moses, beyond civilisation in the wilderness. The evangelist writes, 'The Jews marvelled, saying, How does this Man know letters, having never studied? Jesus answered them and said, My doctrine is not Mine, but His who sent Me.' In other words, the teaching that Christ brings is not the academic learning or the science of this world, wonderful and useful as they might be. He has brought the water of life, He has brought the waters of true worship, as the troparion says.

5] Later on in the same chapter of John's gospel, His fellow Jews question whether He might be the Messiah. They are uncertain because they know Him only as a man and they know where He is from, so they are divided. But presenting Himself to them, He calls out, 'If anyone thirsts, let him come to Me and drink. He who believes in Me, as the Scripture has said, out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.' [Jn.7:37-38] He speaks here of the gift of the Holy Spirit who would come after His glorification.

6] It is the same Holy Spirit that lies within each of us who have received holy chrismation following baptism. We have that anointing, as St John says in his first epistle: 'The anointing which you have received from Him abides in you, and you do not need that anyone teach you... and just as it has taught you, you will abide in Him.' [1Jn.2:27]

7] To be in Christ, therefore, is to be immersed in Him whom we know to be, as He tells St Thomas, the way the truth and the life. That teaching, that wisdom, what we call the mind of Orthodoxy, is within each one of us, in as much as we labour in the Lord to

conform our life to follow in His way, manifest His truth, live that life with integrity, and repent where we fall short.

8] Whenever the holy scriptures are read in the liturgy they are announced with the cry of, wisdom! Let us attend. 'Incline your ear to wisdom, and apply your heart to understanding,' says the book of Proverbs [Prov.2:2]. Our whole communication in Christ together, our common currency, as it were, is Christ, the water of life. St Paul says, 'We preach Christ crucified, to the Jews a stumbling block and to the Greeks foolishness, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.' [1 Cor.23-34]

9] Yes, Christianity has turned the world upside down, just as the Jews at Thessalonica in the Acts of the Apostles said of St Paul and his companions (cf.Acts.17:6) In the same work, St Luke tells us this morning of the disruption that happened after the killing of the protomartyr and archdeacon St Stephen: 'In those days, when the apostles were scattered because of the tribulation that arose over Stephen, they traveled as far as Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch, speaking the word to no one, except to Jews only.' But then at Antioch, gentiles took the message; Antioch, where we, the followers of the way, the wisdom of God, were first called Christians. The very persecution that was supposed to close down the preaching of the apostles only served to spread the gospel abroad.

10] 'We know that all things work together for good to those who love God,' Paul tells the Romans [Rom.8:28] 'To those who are the called according to His purpose.' For the wisdom of the gospel, although it began from Jerusalem, was not to be shut up there for good. And although the world is always trying its hardest to turn matters back the other way; even when we ourselves so often fall back into our old sinful ways, the wisdom of the gospel is still turning the world upside down.

11] Herein lies a mystery; here stands a paradox. For the created world is ordered by the wisdom of God. The Spirit of God hovered over the face of the waters at the beginning (cf. Gen.1:2) and

wisdom, that energy of the divine essence, the Book of Proverbs tells us, was established in Creation from the start, 'For the Father made all things through Wisdom,' says St Athanasios, that is, through Christ, by whom all things were made.

12] But what the scriptures also refer to as the World, can also mean all that has become estranged from the God, this fallen world, that exists in a state of sin. For in truth, it is the sinful world that is standing on its head from God's point of view, and they accuse us of turning the world upside down! As ever, it depends on your perspective, and yet we have the mind of Christ (cf. 1Cor.2:16).

13] That reversal, that restoration of the order of this world is shown in the life of that woman at Jacob's well. Her Samaritan name we do not know, but in her eventual baptism into Christ she was known as Photini, the luminous, now enlightened in the wisdom of Christ. Her former life of multiple broken relationships, what the sociologists refer to as, serial monogamy, I believe, is chaotic, to say the least. But she will leave Mount Gerazim, where her ancestors worshipped, and come to know the worship of God in Spirit and in Truth. In Orthodox tradition she is known as the martyr Photini, who preached the gospel boldly in Rome and eventually suffered under the Emperor Nero.

14] Just as Jacob the patriarch found his future bride, Rachel at the well, so in reverse, as it were, her world turned upside down, Photini discovered her soul's true spouse who is Christ. And together we have found the same, for the Church herself is the bride of Christ the Bridegroom, whom our souls encountered, not at Jacob's well but at the baptismal font, where we first engaged with the water of life and the wisdom of God, 'Not the wisdom of this age, nor of the rulers of this age, who are coming to nothing. But we speak the wisdom of God in a mystery, the hidden wisdom which God ordained before the ages for our glory, which none of the rulers of this age knew; for had they known, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory.' [1Cor.2:6-8]

