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The Samaritan Woman

Fifth of Pascha

Everyone who drinks of this water will thirst again, but whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him will never thirst forever; the water that I shall give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.

1] Where does civilisation begin? Where do we find the line between the wandering tribes of primitive humanity and the settled communities and first cities of the ancient world? Clearly, it is where we first find the beginnings of agriculture, artisans with specialised skills, a warrior class and ruling elites and, moreover, taxation for sure!

2] Those first civilisations of the ancient East established cultures of great confidence and pride, building their ziggurats, pyramids and towers very high. In this way worshipping fallen angels as their gods, to placate the forces of nature that governed their lives. So it is that in the book of Genesis we find the story of the tower of Babel: the memory of an attempt to create a union of mankind, in the face of an uncertain world, that ended in a confused communication and their scattering abroad.

3] But all civilisations depend on one element ~ water ~ essential to our life, along side, not least, a decent drainage system. So it was that the first great

civilisations of old grew up alongside great rivers: the Tigris and Euphrates, the Nile, the Indus.

4] And so down to our own day: not for us, though, the daily journey to the well with a large pitcher, to fetch water for the household. We merely turn a tap and the water flows, even if, occasionally, everything is disrupted, when our plumbing fails and we enter a modern domestic nightmare.

5] But today, we enter just such a scene in the gospel. We are in Sychar, at Jacob's Well, on the road from Galilee to Jerusalem. It is possibly, scholars say, the same as Shechem, modern Nablus or, perhaps, 'Askar, about a mile from Jacob's Well, on the side of Mount Ebal.

6] Here, a woman of mixed race, a Samaritan, comes to draw water. She is a deviant from the Law of Moses, as far as the religion of the Pharisees and Sadducees was concerned. She is undertaking a task which she has done many times, just as her mother did, and her grandmother had done before her, and so on, back through the generations. For without that water, there would be no life at all.

7] Yet today she is confronted by an entirely different way of looking at her life. Generations and generations before her had repeated the same behaviour: that is, after all, how they survived and the course life went on as normal, drawing water from the

well; a way of life that was there before Noah's flood, as Our Lord says in St Luke's gospel, *'They ate, they drank, they married wives, they were given in marriage, until the day that Noah entered the ark, and the flood came and destroyed them all.'* [Lk 17:26-27] What an irony: the water needed for maintain their life became, in superabundance, the death of them all.

8] But Christ tells her, *'Everyone who drinks of this water will thirst again.'* Of course, they will; it is why this fetching and carrying has to be repeated, day after day, after day. But He then informs her of entirely different source of water. But taking Him literally at first, she misunderstands: *'Sir... where do you get that living water?'* By that, she meant water that flowed freely. Yet for Christ, water, that natural element, the medium of life on earth, is a metaphor, a symbol representing and manifesting a life beyond: eternal life, drawn from the true source, the Giver and Creator of all existence Himself.

9] But then, later on, He does the same to His disciples. Next to water and air, of course, we need nourishment, if we are to live. The Disciples bring Him food, but He says to them, *'I have food to eat of which you do not know... My food is to do the will of Him Who sent Me, and to accomplish His work.'* For Christ, food, our daily bread, the sustainer of our life on earth, is also a metaphor; a symbol representing and manifesting a life beyond: the resurrection life,

bestowed even on the dead by the conqueror of Death Himself.

10] And even our labour, our daily work, all the busyness of our activities, likewise point beyond. '*He who reaps receives wages,*' He says. '*And gathers fruit for eternal life, so that sower and reaper may rejoice together.*' For Christ, the work that gathers in our food is a metaphor too; a symbol representing and manifesting the reward of life beyond, in the kingdom: doing the will of the great artificer and Creator of all Himself, our own heavenly Father.

11] Before, that woman of Samaria had laboured in order to eat, and had drunk from Jacob's Well, but it was a disordered life of several marriages separated from, what was then, as Christ says, the salvation found among the Jews. But in the memory of the Orthodox-Catholic Church, she is St Photini, the enlightened one, the illumined in Christ; one, who like the author of this gospel, becomes a theologian; who recognises the Christ and proclaims the message to those around her. She is called *equal-to-the-apostles* in the Tradition, suffering martyrdom eventually at Rome, in the time of Emperor Nero.

12] In paradise, Adam ate the food, the Tree of Life, and drank the water of paradise: in our fallen state we eat only for ourselves, with the knowledge of Good and Evil. In paradise, Adam laboured in the garden to the glory of His creator: in our fallen state we only labour

for ourselves, and as Solomon says, *'I have seen all the works that are done under the sun; and indeed, all is vanity and grasping for the wind.'* [Eccl. 1:14] In paradise, Adam was the priest of creation, leading its worship and offering all to God, receiving back the blessing: in our fallen state we served idols, changing our glory into the image of the false angels.

13] *'What shall we do, that we may work the works of God?'* Christ is asked in John's gospel. He tells them, *'This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He sent.'* [Jn 6:28-29] So this is our work too in Christ, the Way, the Truth and the Life. Not just worshipping in the Orthodox Way, for that would be meaningless without reference to the Truth. Not just believing true Orthodox doctrine, for that would be sterile, fruitless, without reference to an Orthodox Life. Not just pursuing an Orthodox style of life, for that would be pointless, isolated, without reference to the fellowship and order in the way of true Worship. An Orthodox Christian life requires all three: the Way, the Truth and the Life.

14] The point is, of course, we can possess all this already in the Body of Christ, in the Church of the living God, worshipping in spirit and truth. In the Church ~ and only in the Church ~ the searching has finished. We do not labour, here, for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to everlasting life. (cf Jn 6:27) This is what the Divine Liturgy is: it too is the work of the people of God. Christ's work, his food, was to do the will of the Father who sent Him. And our work is to offer the Holy Liturgy, fulfilling His command to do this

in memory of Him, receiving in return the bread of eternal Life. This is our food and drink. For here, we labour in prayer, in fasting, but most importantly, in repentance. And in labouring together, by cooperation, by synergy with the Holy Spirit, we find the true source: a spring of water, welling up to eternal life. As the hymn says, *Receive the Body of Christ, taste the fountain of immortality*. It is to be found nowhere else, and we, indeed, need never thirst again.