

# **BIBLICAL PAGES**

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## **Jesus, a man of His time and space, shows us our true and full humanity**

### **Lectio n° 4 Thirst: caring for a desire**

#### **Introduction**

Very often in the past, the body has been regarded as a stumbling block on the path of Christian spirituality, or even as an ‘enemy’... However, we should not forget that very recently we have celebrated Christmas, that is, the very event in which God became flesh. The Fathers used to say: “Caro salutis est cardo”, “The flesh is the hinge of salvation”; and, as a consequence, Christ did not come to save just the soul, but the whole man. He took our own flesh, not just the appearance of a body (as the heresy called ‘docetism’ taught): “You wanted no sacrifice or cereal offering, but You gave me a body” (Heb 10:5). Christ also experienced hunger and thirst, which are not something to be ashamed of. He shared our own corporeity and gave it a new importance.

In biblical anthropology, the corporeal dimensions of hunger and thirst reveal to man the fact that he is a creature; and food, the first of God’s gifts (Gn 1:29), implies that we are not self-sufficient and that we need something / somebody else: while we must acknowledge our own limitations, we must also establish a relationship with the Creator.

Food and water are primary needs of the body, indispensable to man’s life. Hunger and thirst are therefore used in the Bible as metaphors of spiritual needs that are to be satisfied to stay alive (cf Am 8:11), up to the point that ‘fullness of life’ is equal to “never hunger or thirst again” (Rv 7:16). The need of the body thus opens man up to a different dimension. We could even say that that need is the gift allowing us to pass from one level of experience to the next: Jesus will say, “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for justice” (Mt 5:6), to signify that the same intensity and urgency must be experienced when we are walking on the path to happiness.

The body is that gift by whose dynamics we are prompted to understand that we are not self-sufficient in the spiritual dimension as well, and that we need something / somebody else, up to longing for God.

In the gospels, Jesus Himself hungers (Mt 4:2) and thirsts (Jn 4:7; 19:28). And He cares for the hunger (distribution of bread and fish, cf Mt 14:13ff; 15:32ff and

parallels) and thirst (Jn 4:15) of those that He meets. By taking at heart their poverty and need, He is able to establish a relationship.

In fact, exactly because the Verb became flesh, each and every of man's relationships with his brothers and sisters involves Jesus' very own hunger and thirst: "For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink" (Mt 25:35). He must be seen in everybody and takes upon Himself the hunger and thirst of each and every man.

In this Lectio we will focus on thirst. In particular, on the episode of the Samaritan woman at the well, where two kinds of thirst meet: Jesus' thirst and the woman's thirst.

Let us be guided by Jesus' own attention to the Samaritan woman. How can we care for the needs of those we meet, by making use of our own experience of thirst, up to the point of being able to feel empathy for them, to feel them as part of ourselves? And also, how can we pass from a physiological need to a spiritual one, as the Samaritan woman did?

### **Let us invoke the Holy Spirit**

Spirit of Jesus Christ,  
take what is His and give it to me,  
so that it may become mine.  
Make Your light shine in me  
so that I can recognize Your truth.  
Tie my heart to the faithfulness of believing  
so that I may never part from it.  
And teach me to love,  
given that, if love is lacking,  
truth is dead.  
Make me certain of God's love  
and give me the strength to love Him in my turn,  
so that I may remain in Him and He in me.  
Holy Spirit,  
who are leading to a new creation  
within an aged world,  
fill me with the belief  
of Your divine power.  
*(Romano Guardini)*

## **1. Lectio**

**(to read the Word / to listen to it)**

### **John 4:1-42**

(Please read the passage more than once)

This passage is part of Chapter 4 of St John's Gospel, in the first diptych of revelation (Chapters 2-4), made up of two signs (wine at Cana and the Temple in Jerusalem) and three reactions.

Thanks to the two signs, Jesus presents Himself as the messianic Bridegroom and the New Temple, where Yahweh's presence dwells. The three reactions belong to three characters: Nicodemus, the Samaritan woman and the royal official, respectively representing orthodox Judaism, schismatic Judaism and the pagan world.

The text presents both a narrative technique called 'misunderstanding' – typical of St John's Gospel – and the use of symbols.

The misunderstanding is useful to guide the reader from a lower level to a higher one; and it follows a predetermined pattern: Jesus makes a statement; His interlocutor misunderstands it, interpreting it in a material sense; Jesus explains the correct sense; readers understand the true meaning of what He said.

In this case, the symbolic term is 'water'. 'Symbol' comes from the Greek 'symbollo', which means 'to link'. But what? A primary sense (direct) with a secondary one (figurative). The latter may be understood only through the former, the water of the well ('phréar') and the living water from the spring ('peghé'), water that Jesus represents and gives as a gift.

Let us analyze the text:

- a) 1-6, Introduction
- b) 7-26, Dialogue
- c) 27-30, Conclusion

a)

Jesus leaves Judaea and goes back to Galilee, passing through Samaria.

Samaria was a schismatic reign established when Cyrus (4th century B.C.) let the Jewish exiles – who after the fall of Samaria (721) had been deported first to Assyria and then to Babylon – go back to the country. Those exiles had married pagan women but, going back to Israel, they did not want to repudiate them. They had built a temple on Mt Gerizim, alternative to Jerusalem's. They were despised by the Jews and regarded as "stupid" (cf Si 50:26).

From a geographical point of view Jesus was not compelled to pass there. In fact, He could have passed through the valley of the Jordan, and that would have been the easiest way. Then we understand that St John wants to tell us something more than that; there must be a motive for Jesus to go to Samaria and to stop, "tired by the journey", at the well of Sychar, at an hour when – due to the hot temperatures – it was not exactly right to draw water from.

'Tired' is the translation of the term 'kekopiakos', a verbal form called in Greek 'past participle', used to denote a prolonged situation: Jesus' tiredness remains; it is not limited to that precise moment.

St Augustine tells us that "because He deigned to come to us appearing as a servant, due to the flesh He put on, that same flesh that He put on is His 'journey'. Consequently, 'tired by the journey' means 'tired in the flesh'."

The journey is His quest for man, the quest of God-become-flesh who goes on a visit to the separated brothers and sisters, to the schismatic brothers and sisters of Samaria.

We understand therefore that “He had to pass through Samaria” because of the salvific plan of the Father.

Another point to highlight is the well: in the Bible the well is the place where the patriarchs met their future wives (cf Gn 24:20; Ex 2:14-21) and this is Jacob’s well. However, according to Jewish traditions, the well represents also the Torah; if it is studied and observed, the living water of wisdom will spring from it.

b)

The meeting between Jesus and the Samaritan woman occurs at an unusual hour. Maybe the woman used to go to the well at that very hour in order to avoid inquisitive gazes. Jesus presents Himself as somebody who is in need. He puts Himself in the same position of those He is in front of; He is the God who makes Himself vulnerable and who, in His human dimension, goes begging to man.

Here Jesus’ thirst and the woman’s thirst are one in front of the other. Jesus cares for the woman’s thirst. It is a meeting with reciprocal requests, misunderstandings, and reversals of situation. Two needs meet.

We can highlight two different levels:

1) the woman can actually give something to drink to Jesus who has neither bucket nor rope;

2) Jesus can give the woman something to drink from what is His own.

As far as water is concerned, we can highlight two levels too:

1) water from the well one has to go to every day;

2) living water that “will become a spring of water within, welling up for eternal life”.

Two different kinds of thirst meet: the woman’s and Jesus’.

Jesus cares for the woman’s need which is self-absorbed and which is shown by her five husbands. Her restlessness must open up to a new dimension, must be guided to a new level of desire, to a new identity, to life in God.

Jesus’ need is self-less and free from every sort of selfishness: it opens up, it leaves room to others so that it can listen to them. Thus the woman may grow.

Starting from His thirst, Jesus wants to give His own water, He is thirsting for quenching the thirst of those He meets.

In Chapter 7:37-39, on the last day (the seventh) of the Feast of Shelters, during the ‘liturgy of the water’ foreshadowing the living water which would come out of the Temple at the end of time – as prophesied by Ezekiel 47 – Jesus cried out: “Let anyone who is thirsty come to me! Let anyone who believes in me come and drink!” There, to explain Jesus’ statement, St John makes use of a passage from Scripture: “From His heart shall flow streams of living water”; then he comments: “He was speaking of the Spirit which those who believed in him were to receive”. But how can that happen?

In another passage (Chapter 19:28), at the crucifixion which necessarily involved a burning thirst as one of its greater torments, Jesus once again states: “I am thirsty”, just before uttering “It is fulfilled”.

In the light of these two passages, we do understand that ‘thirst’ is the desire to give the Spirit flowing from His pierced side, when the mission entrusted to Him by the Father would be fulfilled, the mission to give God’s Life to man, to give it to the full (cf Jn 10:11), to quench the thirst for life hidden in each and every man.

The woman would like to drink Jesus’ water so that she may never be thirsty again. That water, “becoming a spring of water within”, makes one reconsider and renew one’s own life, in order to quench the thirst for true life, for God, a wish that is hidden in each and every man.

The Samaritan woman’s identity has to grow, as well as her awareness of her interlocutor, up to the point that she can see in Jesus a prophet, revealing to her who she really is. Then, once she has reached the next level of understanding, she can ask Him to explain the truth about Yahweh’s worship.

Once again we find the Holy Spirit, prefigured at the beginning of the chapter in the wine of Cana and mentioned in the dialogue with Nicodemus: now Jesus states, in front of the schismatic Samaritan woman, that the Father will be worshipped in Spirit and truth, not just in Jerusalem or on Mt Gerizim, but everywhere.

Jesus HAD to come here among the separated brothers and sisters. The proclamation of truth does not take place sometime in the future thanks to an unknown Messiah, but here and now thanks to Jesus’ meeting with the woman and to His care for her secret wish.

When He states, ‘That is who I AM, I who speak to you’, He turns an unworthy and, moreover, heretic woman into the addressee of the ‘revelation formula’ (cf Ex 3:14) which Nicodemus was not ready to acknowledge. This formula that Yahweh revealed to Moses from the burning bush is a special feature of St John’s Gospel.

c)

We have to take note of the attitude of indifference of the disciples, just returned from town. They are scandalized that the Master is talking with a woman in public (it was forbidden by the law) and, moreover, with a Samaritan woman, to be despised. The disciples misunderstand Jesus’ speech too: they have been to town to buy bread and do not gather what Jesus means when He speaks of the ‘harvest’. They do not gather that Jesus’ proclamation in Samaria, the meeting with an emarginated woman, her growth that makes her leave the bucket because she has found the Messiah who gives living water, the promise of the Spirit getting rid of the barriers of the two alternative temples, opening her up to be the first witness of the Christ, are already “the fields ready for harvest”, the harvest “they have not laboured for” but that they can reap. Jesus alone is able to see that harvest.

## **2. Meditatio** **(to meditate on the Word / to let it resound)**

- A meeting, a dialogue, may start from the acknowledgment of one's own need and from seeing it reflected subsequently in the other's need: it is an act of humbleness, of trust. But apart from becoming aware of an immediate need, if we want to listen in a genuine way we must involve the whole of our selves, because our human condition demands that both the body and the spirit take part in a relationship. Dualism, that makes us see body and spirit as two separate entities, and that makes us too anchored to matter or alternatively falsely spiritual, is not part of the Biblical vision of man, characterized by 'unity'. So we must educate ourselves to wholeness or, as Pope Francis I<sup>st</sup> would say, to an "ecology of wholeness" involving also the body, "linking us directly with the environment and with the other living beings" ('Laudato si', n° 155), in order to be able to care for others.

- With this whole gaze let us pay attention to 'shortcoming' as the place of our own desire as well as of those of all that we meet, leaving room for us to grow, leaving room for it to evolve into something different or, better, to be left naked in its very essence which is the longing for God.

I suggest that you read nn° 10, 11 and 28 of our Rule of Life, paying attention to harmony and fullness, as well as to "giving birth to Christ in our brothers' and sisters' hearts", as the true means to be faithful to our consecrated chastity and to pray with a true thirst / longing for God.

I quote St Mother Theresa. Jesus' thirst was her personal revelation, guiding her on her long and difficult journey:

"Unless you feel at the bottom of your hearts that Jesus is thirsting for you, you will not start to understand what He would like to be for you and you for Him."

## **3. Oratio** **(to pray the Word / to repeat it)**

Lord, even today give me the strength  
to believe, to hope, to love.  
Do not leave me halfway,  
absorbed in the many things that are unable to fulfil me.  
Let me stop every day to listen to You,  
so that afterwards I may start walking again  
along the path that You will show me.  
Free me from all that looks indispensable to me while in fact it isn't,  
from all that I believe it is necessary while it is superfluous,  
from all that inflates my ego but cannot fulfil me,  
from all that makes my lips wet but cannot quench the thirst of my heart.  
I know that You are willing to do that  
but please help me to let You do it,

always and now!

#### **4. Contemplatio** **(to contemplate the Word / silence)**

In the silence of our souls, let us be conquered by Jesus' humility, wishing to listen to and to fulfil our thirsting hearts.

#### **5. Collatio** **(to share the Word)**

Gathered around the well of the Word, presence of Christ, let us share our own experience of the text, as if we were drawing 'water' from our common 'spring'.