

**Third Sunday of Lent Cycle A
March 7, 1999**

By Father Charles Bowes

**Exodus 17: 3-7
Romans 5:1-2, 5-6
John 4:5-42**

God thirsts for us.

If someone told me everything I ever did, I'd probably run and hide or die of embarrassment - at least that's my first reaction to self-revelation. Yet that's not what the woman at the well did in John chapter 4. She actually boasted about it - told others: "Hey, you guys, He told me everything I ever did - and I felt so free. So come and see." And they did that. That must be the way God loves: God shows us how we are and the showing sets us free. The good and the bad God does not use to dominate or destroy but uses to liberate.

"God proves his love for us while we are still sinners," says St. Paul in his letter to the Romans chapter 5. Or put in other words, God answers us even when we are crabby and difficult. While we are wrong, we are loved - and that's hard to believe; too good to be true - but it is true: while we are wrong, we are loved. In commenting on this chapter 4 of St. John's gospel, St. Augustine wrote that the very one who asks for a drink promises a drink. The very one who seems to be

in need, hoping to receive, is the one who is rich, wanting to give, wanting to satisfy our deepest thirsts.

The great truth is, God thirsts for us, even in our sin. Remember, it is Jesus who asks the confused and searching woman for a drink. It is he who reached out to her.

Our endless thirst is what makes us work so hard at physical life: producing, earning, consuming. Thirst, too, excites our spiritual longings, our proving and testing, our fretful driving for virtue, even for perfection. But our thirst is so great we can get lost in it and ignore the very truth that could satisfy...namely, that God thirsts for us. When we see the full mystery of Lent and Easter, we realize that, as great as our dry thirst and wide yearning may be, it is God's eternal thirst for us, for our faith, our trust, our love, that is the central mystery of our being.

This means we don't have to be perfect to know God or for God to know us. Knowing God is getting through this difficult day. Knowing God is doing this seemingly neutral or boring thing, keeping this promise, meeting this deadline. The rock we strike may be a typewriter, a computer, a stove or hard granite with a sledgehammer. The hidden spring of love we experience may be sudden and overwhelming - as for the woman at the well - or God's love may be very subtle, like a new way of looking at someone or something or trying

one more solution to an apparently insoluble problem. God's love for us goes on all day, every day - his thirst is never quenched.

If we see our Lenten self-denial as a means only to self-improvement, a claim we lay to righteousness, we've missed the point all together. The question before us today is neither what we will give up for Lent nor what additional efforts we will take on. Rather, it is to discover what impedes us from loving others: what attitudes, habits, or comforts keep us from extending an embrace to any person or group of people. God thirsts for us in love...and in so far as we love, we share in God's thirst and satisfaction.

Lent can be for us a seeing ourselves as we are and being unafraid of what we see. Lent can be for us consoling seeing, comforting, an honest seeing and being free again, reminding us God loves. Lenten penance that lets us see fiercely is good penance. And the best penance may well be that which we are unable to keep. For failure in penance deflates our inflated egos. Penance which hits us again and again with demands we not only fail to obey, but which trouble us, confront our illusions about ourselves, is good penance. Such penance may be more effective if we fail in our resolutions than if we succeed, for its purpose is not to confirm us in our sense of virtue, but to bring home to us our radical need of salvation and God's persistent intent to give it. God thirsts for us and our belief in this enables us to share this holy food and fellowship with extraordinary confidence and to share the same with all we meet.

Mother Teresa of Calcutta once commenting on her spiritual life wrote: "I am not called to be successful. I'm called to be faithful."

God thirsts for us.