

**Homily for March 3, 2002  
3rd Sunday of Lent Cycle A**

**By Father Charles Bowes**

**Exodus 17:3-7  
Romans 5:1-2, 5-8  
John 4:5-42**

## *Little by little, conversation becomes conversion.*

It is rather easy to take this story of the woman at the well and leave it there as a story – with profound theological implications for conversion and the manifestation of Jesus as Messiah to people alien to him. To do so would be to short-circuit the possibility of conversion for ourselves. The story is really a model of conversation not just between two people – but also between us and God in and through Jesus Christ.

In the Samaritan town where Jacob's well is located, Jesus asked a woman for a drink of water – a simple request, but one whose complex meaning has been plumbed for the Church for centuries. Who was this woman? And what prompted Jesus to so much as speak with her?

First, she was a Samaritan, and no respectable Jew would have anything to do with a Samaritan, much less a Samaritan woman; their very utensils for eating and drinking were considered unclean. Jesus was treading on dangerous ground in even speaking

with her, let alone actually asking to use the vessels she employed to gather water. The evangelist didn't even give the woman the dignity of a name, but noted that when Jesus' disciples returned from buying food in the town, they "were amazed that he was talking with a woman but still no one said, 'what are you looking for?' or 'why are you talking to her?'" By then, of course, they were probably used to some of his unusual behavior.

Going to the well was a social occasion in that time; people went for water, of course, but also to catch up on the latest gossip, and perhaps to do a little flirting. In our own times, a looser is sometimes described as having gone to the well once too often. Having had five husbands and living with the sixth man, the woman of the gospel could have been considered as having gone to the well too often. She was wise in the ways of men, and apparently adept at pleasing them – a Samaritan version of Liz Taylor, if you will. She may have had her own well-founded suspicions about what this odd man was looking for. Why else would a lone Jew be chatting up a Samaritan woman? Why would he ask for a drink from her "unclean" bucket? This strange Rabbi was definitely a challenge. Notice that nowhere does Jesus require repentance of her, as though she were not well –

disposed to receive his gift of living water. Technically, Mosaic Law would not have forbidden the woman to be married five times, though such a situation was not customary. As with Nathaniel, Jesus tells her something which he would not have been expected to know. Even reference to her living with a man not her husband may not be so such an accusation against her as a recognition that divorce law frequently left the woman in a situation where she had to live with whatever man would have her, simply to survive. Some scholars today have suggested that the genuinely recognized authentic sayings of Jesus against divorce must be read in the then-contemporary context of defense of women who frequently passed into a state of poverty because of divorce.

The point is that a conversation took place between Jesus and this woman – a conversation which touched upon the deepest concerns of this woman and which placed Jesus in a point of jeopardy yet again. It doesn't matter that she was a Samaritan, a woman, to be shunned. It doesn't matter what her past and present flaws were. He knew who she was and what she was, and it didn't matter. He knew what was expected of him as a Jew. He knew what limitations there were upon his rightful contact with any woman, let alone a Samaritan. But none of that mattered. None of it mattered.

What did matter was the fact that questions could be asked and a dialog could take place. There's a saying: A friend is someone who knows all about you and loves you anyhow. That's how Jesus related to this woman and she to him. That's how God relates to us in and through a dialog through Jesus Christ. For example, we might ask a question such as, "Lord, how did you deal with relationships in your life with members of

the opposite sex? How did you handle your struggles with the customs of the time, which needed changing? Where are you when I need your help in my struggles with family and relationships?" And then after we ask the question – we listen – in fact the very asking of the question, especially a question which has deep meaning – the very asking of the question entails a posture of listening, of waiting. And thus the dialog continues – between us and God in and through the humanity of Jesus Christ.

A song by Charles Fox, made popular by Roberta Flack, parallels the gospel story as it might take place today:

*And there he was...*  
*A stranger to my eyes,*  
*Strumming my pain with his fingers,*  
*Singing my life with his words,*  
*Killing me softly with his song,*  
*Killing me softly with his song,*  
*Telling my whole life with his words,*  
*Killing me softly with his song.*

Little by little, conversation  
becomes conversion.