

Homily on the Samaritan woman

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In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One God. Amen.

Today, on the 5th Sunday of Pascha, we listened to the Gospel reading of Saint John about a Samaritan woman's conversation with Jesus Christ, our Lord and Saviour.

This Gospel reading is very important to us, Orthodox Christians. It forewarns us of the establishment of Christ's Church here on earth, of the day on which the Holy Spirit will descend upon the Holy Apostles and the establishment of Christ's new covenant.

This day is known to us as Pentecost. Christ makes this evident to the Samaritan woman when He tells her: "Woman, believe Me, the hour is coming when you will neither on this mountain, nor in Jerusalem, worship the Father" (John 4:21).

Jesus had left Judea and was travelling towards Galilee.

To get to Galilee, he had to travel through Samaria, which led him to the city of Sychar. Being tired from his travels, our Lord halted at Jacob's well, where a spring was contained in a cistern created by the Old Testament Patriarch Jacob.

Wells were very important because they were very rare and valuable in desert life. Hence, wells came to symbolise life itself.

This well is still a shrine today, for Christians and Jews alike; and pilgrims can still drink from its water.

This well was in the news back in the early 80's, when Jewish zealots broke into the Orthodox chapel over the site and murdered the monk guardian there, who is now regarded as a genuine martyr for the faith—St. Philemon of Jacob's Well.

The fact that Jesus is tired, hungry and thirsty from His journey, shows us his complete humanity. It is the sixth hour, noon time. His disciples had left him to obtain food in the city. Jesus Christ, being thirsty, asked the Samaritan woman for some water to drink.

But, we can also see that He is divine. Living as God in eternity, He knows the present, past and future of all. Thus as God, He knows that the Samaritan woman has already been married five times, and that at present she is living in sin with yet another man.

Also, He tells her that He can give her 'living water' from an Eternal Well, and He tells the disciples that His 'food is to do the will of Him who sent Me, and to finish His work'.

Another important point is that she was a Samaritan, and the Samaritans were a sect, regarded as heretics by the Jews. Jews would never make contact with Samaritans and

would shun them. Pious Jewish men would never enter into conversation with a woman in public, not even if she was related to them.

Our Lord says to her that if she drinks the water he offers she will never thirst again, and that it “will become in her a fountain of living water springing up into eternal life.”

What is our God and Saviour talking about? In today’s Gospel He explains more to us. The encounter between Jesus Christ and the Samaritan woman is a sacramental encounter. It is an encounter where the need for repentance and purification is central.

The Lord knows the woman at Jacob’s Well is a sinner. With great gentleness, skill and compassion, He directs her to confess, and guides her to the truth of who He is and who she may become. The Lord speaks, and then graciously waits for her response.

As He feels that she is able to understand what He is saying, He reveals more and more. She asks to receive the living water and the Lord wants to grant her request, but first He helps to pave the way by revealing the things that stand in the way. She must first confess and repent her sins.

Purification is the first step in the spiritual life, because virtue is the necessary foundation. If we attempt to embark on the spiritual life without this, we will be as the foolish man who built his house on sand.

At the first appearance of temptation, the house crumbles because its foundation is weak. But the house built on the firm foundation of virtue stands firm. Not even thousands of demons could bring it down.

Jesus is helping the Samaritan woman to get rid of the things in her life that distract her from an intimate relationship with God based on “spirit and truth.”

This is what the sacrament of Confession is all about; not just the listing of sins, but the uprooting of the causes of sin.

As we progress in the spiritual life, what we confess becomes more and more subtle; as we begin to work with the thoughts, emotions and conditioning that give rise to our sin.

When we are denied the living water of God, we search for other sources of water in the hope that our thirst will be quenched. But, this only causes our thirst to become greater.

The soul’s search for alternatives to God turns into cravings and addictions, to things that only satisfy very briefly and when that is gone, so is happiness.

We really need to wake up and smell the coffee. We must begin to be honest with ourselves and start removing these distractions bit by bit.

We must leave behind all our earthly cares and all the superfluous, materialistic solutions we invent that do not, and never will, work.

Who is this Samaritan woman? She is an important figure in the Johannine community. The Samaritan woman, like many other women, contributed to the spread of Christianity.

She therefore has a place of honour among the apostles. In Greek sermons from the fourth to the fourteenth centuries she is called "apostle" and "evangelist."

In these sermons the Samaritan woman is often compared to the male disciples and apostles, and found to surpass them. In Greek she is called "Photini", in Russian "Svetlana".

Byzantine hagiographers developed the story of the Samaritan woman, beginning where Saint John left off.

At Pentecost, Saint Photini received baptism, along with her five sisters, Anatole, Photo, Photis, Paraskeve, Kyriake, and her two sons, Photeinos and Joseph.

Following this she began a career as a missionary, travelled widely, preaching the good news of the Messiah's coming, His death and Resurrection.

When Nero, the emperor of Rome, began to persecute Christians, Photini and her son Joseph were in Carthage, in Africa, where she was preaching the Christian gospel.

After Jesus appeared to Photini in a dream, she sailed to Rome. Her son and many Christians from Africa accompanied her. Photini's arrival and activity aroused curiosity in the capital city. Everyone talked about her. "Who is this woman?" they asked.

"She came here with a crowd of followers and she preaches Christ with great boldness."

She anticipated her arrest by Nero's soldiers and went to see the Emperor himself with her son Joseph and her Christian followers.

When the emperor saw them, he asked why they had come. Photini answered, "We have come to teach you to believe in Christ." The half-mad ruler of the Roman Empire did not frighten her.

She converted and baptised the daughter of Nero, Domnina, and her slaves and gave her the name Anthousa.

When Nero heard this, he condemned Photini and all her followers to death: by fire, by poison and every known torture. But they all survived unscathed.

Nero imprisoned them then for 3 years and had everyone except Photini beheaded. She prayed day and night to God to be released from life. Some days later her wish was granted and she gave her soul into God's hands.

Why does the Church commemorate the Samaritan woman today? Because this is the first Sunday after Mid-Pentecost, the feast that stands half-way between Easter and Pentecost. At Easter the great truths of the Church are revealed - that Christ is both God and Man, that He is crucified and risen from the dead.

However, these truths may remain rather abstract, until at Pentecost we understand their inner meaning, their implications for our daily life.

By the Coming of the Holy Spirit, these truths become alive, and we worship Christ in spirit and in truth. Thus the Church reads to us the words 'the hour is coming when the true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth'.

And this is why the world still continues today, why the world has not yet ended. Until the Gospel of Christ has been preached in spirit and in truth, that is, in the Orthodox manner, throughout the world, the world cannot end.

For as long as there are new Samaritans, new peoples, new tribes to hear the Truth, as long as there are people who can still potentially become Orthodox, the world must continue, for there is still a lot of harvesting to be done.

Amen.