

*'At Jacob's well, Jesus met the Samaritan woman. He Who screened the earth with clouds asked water of her.'* So begins the Doxastikon heard last night at Vespers. It is one of those paradoxes found so often in the hymns of the Church. We had something similar on Great Friday at the service of Twelve Gospels: *'He who hung the earth upon the waters is today suspended upon the cross.'*

What else do we observe here but the gentleness of our God; our redemption and salvation is begun at His very incarnation; that God should for our sakes make Himself vulnerable, daring to entrust Himself into our hands. What are His first words to this woman of Samaria in this encounter? *'Give me a drink.'* Unknowing, she quenches the thirst of God. But how can God thirst, the Almighty, the Creator? As the Psalmist says, *"I am God, your God! I will not rebuke you for your sacrifices or your burnt offerings... I will not take a bull from your house nor goats out of your folds... For every beast of the forest is Mine and the cattle on a thousand hills... If I were hungry, I would not tell you; For the world is Mine, and all its fullness. Will I eat the flesh of bulls or drink the blood of goats?"* [Ps.50]

God *needs* nothing from us; He has no *needs*, He is God. He does not need sacrifice; it is we who need to offer. He needs no gifts but we need to give. St John in his gospel makes the point from the beginning: *'And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.'* [Jn.1:14] and when was His glory revealed? When He is lifted up on the Cross, says the evangelist: *'And I, if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all peoples to Myself.'* [Jn.12:32]

As ever, there is a word of this in Greek: *Kenosis* - Christ emptying himself, laying aside the power of his divine reign for a time: hiding, as it were, His essence within our human nature, to be born among us; that a human being, the best of our race, should be the *God-bearer*, the Theotokos. Should we not tremble in awe at the very idea!

There is a story told of King George V who reigned during the early part of the twentieth century. He used to visit a particular Anglican Church in Brighton whenever he was there because he liked the building and was fond of the divine service there. When the king was once told that the numbers in the congregation who attended the church had gone down recently, he remarked, "How strange: it has always been very full whenever / was there." Yes, the king was there; of course it was full whenever he were present. But who recognised Christ for who He was when he came among us? He did not come in His glory: He came in humility, in *Kenosis*, as he does today to the Samaritan woman, asking for water.

St John, of course, wants us to understand that this need of Jesus is a very real human need. He is no illusion, or mere spirit or appearance; he has a body like ours - confounding the Docetist heretics who taught otherwise. But his human nature is a parable, an image, a symbol for what is beyond. And just as we need water, so that need in creation points us to a greater need, a more pressing concern. The Samaritan woman might offer water from Jacob's Well but He has on offer the 'water of eternal life.'

Of course, at first, she does not understand; she takes Him literally. She thinks he can save her having to make this irksome journey every day to the well: No, He's not. Our religion, let's face it, is not about making this life easier, better, less complicated, free from risk and danger, less effort... Our religion is about, starting from our own vulnerability, our own weakness, humbly pouring out our own selves to God. And in return, receiving a well that springs up to eternal life. Again, as the psalmist says, '*There is a river whose streams shall make glad the city of God, The holy place of the tabernacle of the Most High. God is in the midst of her, she shall not be moved... The Lord of hosts is with us; The God of Jacob is our refuge.*' [Ps.46]

What can we learn from all this? There is so much that can be said about this encounter at the well, so many themes that may be drawn out. Let us for a start acknowledge the profound humility of Our Lord. We even have an icon in Holy tradition of the extreme humility of Our Lord, brought out for the Bridegroom Services of

Passion Week: the total surrender of Himself, accomplished on the Cross. Our religion invites to the same for the sake of His body the Church. Truly, humility is an integral virtue in our Orthodox Tradition. Here is a measure by which we may judge ourselves before we must come to the final judgement seat of Christ: what is it in ourselves that holds us back; which passion towards sin prevents us serving God, serving the life of this congregation, serving any who come to us? Is it pride? Is it sloth?

*Kenosis*, self-emptying, is another great paradox, like that hymn at the start. It is a mystery because in emptying oneself, the more we are filled with divine grace; the more we have that unity with the mind of Christ who, as Paul tell us, emptied Himself, taking on the form of a slave. *Kenosis* in our Orthodox thinking is the opposite of that egotism of which I spoke of last week, whereby we transcend and detach ourselves from the sinful passions.

The Samaritan woman, later to be the martyr for Christ, Photini, had many needs, not least, it seems, the need for some kind of marriage partner in what the sociologists call 'serial monogamy'. Driven, no doubt, largely by economic necessity to have racked up a total of six 'husbands' so far, she will find instead, in Christ, a way of life that is not destined for futility. May the Lord, also grant us who have seen the true light; who have received the heavenly Spirit; who have found the true faith, to find the way of humility and offer our own lives as a living sacrifice in His service.