

*Give me a drink.*

It sounds quite an abrupt way to begin a conversation with a stranger. Graceless even. *Give me a drink*, Jesus says. Yet when we pause for a moment, the request begins to make sense. It is the hottest part of the day, the sixth hour, when the sun stands high and the heat presses down on the earth. Jesus, tired from travelling since early morning with his disciples, sits down beside a well outside the town of Sychar, in Samaritan territory – where Jews did not usually linger. The well is there, but he has no bucket. A woman arrives with one. So he asks her for water.

We know what that moment feels like. When someone is truly thirsty, the ordinary courtesies fall away. Thirst brings a person down to what is simple and human. A drink is needed, and needed now. The Gospel tells us that the well is Jacob's well. Jacob's well was already ancient when Jesus sat beside it. For generations people had come there to draw water. Wells were meeting places where ordinary life unfolded.

We're like that too. People gather where drinks are found. In offices, there is the water cooler; in the staff common room at School, the hot water boiler and free tea and coffee. And if you want to know what is really happening in the building, that is often the place to stand for five minutes. Someone pauses for a drink, and another stops to talk. A small circle forms. The conversation may be light, sometimes a little gossipy, yet the simple act of stopping for a drink creates a moment where people meet. At Jacob's well something similar begins to happen. Jesus asks for water and a conversation begins. The woman who has come to draw from the well finds herself speaking with a stranger who should not, by all the conventions of the time, be speaking to her at all. Yet the conversation continues.

In that moment the woman has something Jesus needs. She has the bucket. She can reach the water. The Son of God sits beside the well as a tired traveller who depends upon the kindness of another person. The Gospel never tells us whether she gave him the drink he asked for. Perhaps she did. Perhaps she lowered the bucket, drew the water and handed it to him. It is easy to imagine that moment: a thirsty man drinking deeply from the well before speaking further. The story itself does not linger there, but moves toward the deeper conversation that follows. At first the woman responds very practically. She points out the obvious: *Sir, you have nothing to draw water with, and the well is deep.* In other words, that all sounds very impressive, but you do not even have a bucket.

Slowly the conversation begins to deepen, and the woman realises that she is standing in the presence of someone who understands her life with a clarity she has never known before. Like the woman at the well, beneath our ordinary needs there is a deeper longing. Scripture speaks about it in the language of hunger and thirst. In the Beatitudes Jesus says, *Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness*. Those words describe a longing that cannot be satisfied by the things that usually occupy our attention. They speak about the desire for a life that is good and true, about the desire to stand rightly before God and with one another.

The conversation at Jacob's well reveals that deeper thirst. The woman arrives thinking only of the water she must carry home. Soon she is speaking about worship, about truth, about the hope that God might answer the questions that have followed her through life. The story does not end there. She leaves her water jar behind and returns to the town. She tells the others about the man she has met. Curiosity draws them out to the well and they ask Jesus to remain with them. For two days he stays among them and many come to believe in him. A simple request for a drink becomes the beginning of faith for a whole community.

Later in the Gospel another moment of thirst appears. On the cross he says, *I thirst*. Another cry from the psalms echoes there: *My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?* The same psalm speaks of thirst: *Parched as burnt clay is my throat, and my tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth*. These are the words of someone whose body has reached the limits of human endurance. They are also the words of a life that has been given completely.

Dear brothers and sisters, Lent is a time when we begin to notice the things we reach for when we feel thirsty inside. We all know that feeling. Something is missing. Something needs to be filled. We reach for whatever is close at hand. Sometimes it helps for a moment. Sometimes it leaves us just as thirsty as before. The Gospel brings us back to the well. Jesus sits beside it as a thirsty man, yet he tells the woman that the water he gives becomes a spring within us, welling up to eternal life. The deepest thirst of the human heart is not meant to be ignored or covered over. It is meant to lead us somewhere. It is meant to lead us to him. Lent is the season when we return to that well and discover that the one who once asked for a drink is also the one who gives the water that truly satisfies.

And it all began with those simple words: *Give me a drink*. With the woman at the well we beseech Jesus:                      Lord, *give me this water*.