

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on The Third Sunday in Lent
March 8, 2015

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Every year in mid-Lent we get to take a break from the three-year cycle of readings. We are invited to turn our attention to some passages from the Gospel of St. John. This is not just to give the Fourth Gospel equal time in a three year cycle devoted to Matthew, Mark, and Luke! Rather it is in recognition of *the central place* Saint John's Gospel has in the proclamation of the Christian message. At the most important times of year *we turn to John*.

The incident of Our Lord's encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well is a case in point. With graphic details St. John memorably records the way eternal life is offered in Jesus Christ, and how we may come to that life. St. John always means more than he says. So pay attention to the conversation between Jesus and the woman and you will see in it an example of the pastoral way Jesus deals with your own soul.

The conversation is revealing and fascinating in itself. And at the end there is one of those graphic touches that can only come from *one who was there*. This is the remembrance of one of the Lord's disciples who came upon the scene and was surprised that Jesus had even been talking to a Samaritan woman. The conversation had ended, and when she left it was remarked, "The woman left her water pot." That seems so much like an incidental remark, something that has no bearing on the narrative. But as everywhere else, in John's Gospel everything is there for a reason. "The woman left her water pot" means *she meant to come back*. Her leaving the pot at the well was a sign she was coming to faith in Jesus. After meeting the Lord, this woman's first impulse was the same as that of the fisherman Andrew and the tax collector Levi. She went to her people and told them about Jesus.

The whole encounter put God Incarnate in a happy and expansive mood. He forgot about physical hunger, the need for food, and the weariness that were the stated concerns at the outset of the incident. Jesus went on about a different kind of food and was eloquent in His foretelling of the coming harvest. The disciples were respectful of their Master, but they must have thought their He had been out in the sun too long! Was He delirious? Still, as they listened to the Lord, if one among

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them had looked away he would have seen the line of townspeople already coming out of Sychar and heading for the well *and for Jesus Christ*.

They were coming. Jesus had not even *talked* to these people. They had only heard about Him imperfectly from the Samaritan woman. Yet God Incarnate saw the first ray of gospel light in their souls. We call Him Lord of History. He knows the future better than we know the past or present. In these people the Lord of history saw the long development of faith that would lead to an everlasting harvest. These people were the ancestors of the Palestinian Christians who are suffering so terribly right now in their homeland. Fifty years ago Christians comprised 20% of the area's population. Today they are less than 5%, and being squeezed out. We can only stand in awe of what Jesus knew but did not tell us. But what we *do* know is that St. John proclaimed that the Son of God already accepted these Samaritans, even at the outset of their faith journey, as already on the way to eternal life.

The trust of Jesus our Lord is magnanimous and kingly. And it is a challenge to our loyalty. You and I disappoint Him so often. But we can never consent to betray His absolute confidence in us. In the incident with these souls, coming out of Sychar, (which means "city of liars") the Lord is so happy, so triumphant. Here is the first earthly revelation of Christ as *Salvator mundi*, savior of the world.

It strengthens our resolve to strive once again for perfection. St. John's Gospel wants you and me to never forget that like these poor souls streaming out from the city of liars to meet Jesus, we too can cause that joyful smile on the lips of the Saviour as He sees first steps of faith, *and counts the harvest certain*.