

More Than He Asked For

John 4:5-26, Lent Sunday 3-A

March 19, 2017

Most of us have probably heard that old expression before, haven't we, of having: "An albatross around one's neck"? It comes to us from a rather long poem, written way back in 1798 by the British poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge entitled: "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner." -- In the storyline of this poem, there is a fishing vessel in the southernmost part of the ocean, not far from Antarctica, making its way across the open seas when suddenly, out of nowhere there appears, in the sky, an albatross following this ship and an "albatross" is the largest of all flying birds still alive in the world today!

For an albatross to follow your boat, in the ancient world—was considered to be a sign of good luck! BUT WOULDN'T YOU KNOW IT—IT IS PRECISELY AT THIS POINT THAT SOMETHING TOTALLY SENSELESS HAPPENS! AN OLD SAILOR WHO WAS ABOARD THAT SHIP—THE ANCIENT MARINER--SHOOTS THAT BEAUTIFUL BIRD WITH HIS CROSSBOW AND KILLS IT!

What follows? Soon thereafter there are some horrendous storms— that come up on the high seas—and the other men—aboard that ship suddenly sense a powerful connection between these storms—and the Mariner's having killed that beautiful bird! These stormy seas, THEY CONCLUDE, must be the result—of some type of a divine retribution and punishment descending upon them all because of what the mariner had done!

Even when the ship's crew members are too thirsty to speak, they let the mariner know, through their nasty glances, that they blame him and his action for this dreadful curse. Therefore, as an outward sign of guilt and wrongdoing—and punishment—they literally hang the carcass of that dead albatross around the mariner's neck—to symbolize his guilt in killing that bird. It's at this point in the poem that the ancient mariner says:

*Ah! Well a day! What evil looks had I from old and young!
Instead of the cross, the albatross about my neck was hung!*

In some ways, what we see happening here to this Samaritan woman in our Gospel lesson this morning is much like what happened to the ancient mariner in Coleridge's poem and much like what happened to Helen Prynne too in Nathaniel Hawthorne's all-time classic: THE SCARLET LETTER.

So the really big question that presents itself to us is: What, if any, are the albatrosses that each of us may still having hanging around our necks, or what, if any, are the albatrosses that we are still willing to gladly hang around the necks of other people—on this Third Sunday in Lent—as we make our personal way, once again, ever closer to Holy Week: to Palm Sunday, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday and Easter morning?

One of the best-known lines from the "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," is:

"Water, water, everywhere—and not a drop to drink!"

I think that this is how a lot of us may feel, sometimes, even as God's people—when we are doing our best to faithfully navigate our way through this world to the next! But our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, Crucified and Risen from the dead, is present here again with us today to tap each one of us on the shoulder—by his resurrection power—reminding us that he has something of FAR GREATER VALUE; OF ETERNAL VALUE—to offer to every one of us—than anything he could ever ask us to give to him!

Jesus certainly did ask the Samaritan woman, initially, for a drink of water in our Gospel lesson today and I imagine that she gladly gave it to him—but not without provoking, deep within her, some shocking questions of her own!

- In her world men never spoke to women in public.
- In her world men certainly did NOT speak to women—who had acquired the kind of reputation that she had acquired for herself—whether justifiably so, or not.

This can be determined by the fact that she alone went to draw the water for her household—AT HIGH NOON—in the hottest part of the day—when all the other women went first thing in the morning—when the temperature OUTSIDE was far cooler. She stopped going for water at that time—because too often, WHEN SHE DID, SHE DISCOVERED that she ended up becoming the topic of everyone else's conversations.

- Moreover no orthodox Jew, be they man or women, would ever dare to speak to a Samaritan—certainly not in public—for the Jews despised the Samaritans.

But what does Jesus do? He not only asked this woman, this Samaritan woman, for a glass of water—he offered to give to her—even as he still offers to give to every one of us—here present in this House of God again today—something far more valuable and precious than he had asked of her! Jesus said to her: *"If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him and he would have given you living water"* (v. 10)!

Dear friends, we just sang about this marvelous gift of LIVING WATER that Christ longs to give to each of us in the second verse of our Entrance Hymn—today!

See the streams of living water springing from eternal love!
Well supply your sons and daughters and all fear of want remove!
Who can faint while such a river, ever will their thirst assuage?
Grace which, like the Lord, the Giver, never fails from age to age!

As Jesus makes plain to us just three chapters later here in John's Gospel—this living water is none other than the HOLY SPIRIT of GOD WHOM HE LONGS TO PLACE WITHIN US! This living water of the Holy Spirit still brings to every one of us—the forgiveness of all of our sins—along with a forgiving spirit—that would gladly empower us to forgive other people, completely and fully from our hearts—the forgiveness of their sins too.

In John 7:37-39, *"On the last day of the feast, the great day, Jesus stood up and cried out, 'If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. Whosoever, believes in me, as the Scripture has said, 'Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water!'* Now this he said about the Spirit—whom those who

believed in him were to receive, for as yet the Spirit had not been given, because Jesus was not yet glorified!"

Whenever God fills us with the Holy Spirit, whenever we receive from him the forgiveness of sins—to such a degree that we in turn gladly forgive others of their sins too—along with that forgiveness, he brings to us also the SURE HOPE OF HEAVEN—THE BLESSED ASSURANCE OF ETERNAL LIFE, EARMARKED WITH NOTHING LESS THAN GOD'S OWN PEACE, POWER, JOY AND LOVE that now radiates to outside world from deep within us—and radiates to the outside world in such a way—to remove from them us and them all of the albatrosses that we may have hanging around our neck—as well as the albatrosses other people may have hanging around their necks. But this only happens when the HOLY SPIRIT removes from us all of the spiritual cataracts from our eyes, when we look at the cross and can sing convincingly with the Hymn Writer:

"Water, water, everywhere, nor a drop to drink!"

Like the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well in Samaria that Jesus encounters in our Gospel lesson today, and like the seafaring man, the ancient mariner, who shot the albatross—only to discover sometime later, that in shooting of that albatross he had taken a dead aim at life itself, discovering too late that he had shot himself.

He then found himself at sea, surrounded by water as far as he could see; but it was water, water that he could not drink—because to do so was to die. Salt water only makes you want more and more water but eventually salt water will kill you!

We may not really be aboard a vessel at drift in a sea full of salt water, but we can take the more modern approach and think of our human dilemma as being adrift on a sea of things that the advertisers all tell us will satisfy our every need, our every want and quench our every thirst.

But the truth of the matter is—that our trying to satisfy the deepest yearnings of our human spirits with material things is still a lot like drinking saltwater—because once we have tasted them—these material "fixes" to which we can all become addicted—only leave us with wanting more—and more—and more—until we die!

We all should have learned by now that we need more than simply "more" of whatever it is this old world has to offer us! We should have all learned by now that we all need more than simply more than simply the initial desires of our heart—to genuinely find—real meaning for our lives in this life!

But somehow life, at times, becomes for us something similar to an albatross—"A BIRD THAT GETS SHOT DEAD" in the living out of it. We take on life, but often end up feeling that we "got took" and have been taken in the process! Thus the poet captures the ancient mariner speaking to himself, when in his poem, he further wrote:

God save thee, ancient Mariner, from the fiends that plague thee thus!

Why look'st thou so? With my cross-bow I shot the albatross!

Jesus was saying to this woman: "Woman, there is more." There is more to life than your day-in-and-day-out trips to this well for water. There is more to life than the mundane living of life.

There is more to life than the messiness of life that your life is currently in. There is more that God has to offer, and he offers it to you as surely as you can offer me a drink of water, Jesus said to the woman.

Even as Jesus was asking this woman for a drink of water, he went on to offer her something from himself that was much more than anything that she could ever give to him. Jesus is speaking in the same kind of language to us here that he did one day in his Good Shepherd discourse when he said to the Jewish people who had come to faith in him: *"I have come that you might have life and have it more abundantly"* (John 10:10)!

Jesus knew that all the water contained in Jacob's Well could not meet her deepest need for finding a true sense of meaning and ultimate liberation in her life—the kind of life that sets one totally free from having to live out one's life under the constant scrutiny and the need for approval always for the blessing of other people.

Scottish theologian William Barclay once wrote that "... there are two great days in a person's life, 'the day we are born and the day we discover why we were born and put upon this earth.'" This woman needed more than earthly water to come alive! She needed the stamp of God's own approval upon her life—not simply in her desire to do better—but in her coming to know that Jesus was the Promised Messiah and the Savior of her soul. Jesus knew all there was to know about her—and he loved her in spite of it all.

There are those who say the fact that she had had five husbands was no real proof in and of itself—that she was leading an immoral lifestyle. Perhaps all of those five previous husbands had simply died what some people still prefer to identify today as a natural death!

But the fact that she came to the well in the middle of the day, when no other women would be there—who came at dawn to perform this awesome task—when the temperature was much cooler—is an indication that she too often was the topic of conversation that took place down there at the well!

As often happens in John's Gospel, Jesus is speaking on one level and the person with whom he is conversing is speaking on a different level! She heard him wrong. In other words, *"Jesus how can you give me water! You don't even have a bucket, or even a soup ladle to dip into the well and draw the water out of it!"*

Jesus' response to this dear lady is that the water she draws from the well may sustain within her, to a large degree, day-to-day life; and what she can do she's done; but the water he's offering to give to her is eternal life, life everlasting—is truly what makes our daily lives worth living and that only he can do this for her!

It is helpful for us to take note of the fact that though Jesus knew everything there was to know about her life—he did not judge her. He did not condemn her. Instead he keeps his offer open to her—and to each of us again today as well! An offer for living water—to be made alive by the real presence of God alive in our lives—and to discover that in the kind of life that our God

intends for us to have—there is always “Water, water, everywhere—and more than enough for us to drink—and to still have plenty of it left to share with others!

Brothers and sisters, have you ever noticed—that when bad things happen to us in our lives—or even happen to someone else—our natural tendency is to look for someone to blame? Sometimes the person we blame is ourselves! Sometimes the person we blame is someone else! And when you get right down to it—this is really nothing more than another sad attempt, on our part, of bringing about our own sense of “self-justification!

But this season of Lent—is allowing our gracious God to fix our eyes solely once again—upon his own beloved Son—Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord—and to see that he was the one who took the blame of all of our wrongdoing and sins upon himself—that paying the price of our rebellion upon the cross—he might be raised again from the dead—to assure us that God our Heavenly Father accepted the sacrifice he made—thereby, bringing to us also, nothing less than the certain hope of eternal life! Amen