

Lent with Ruth Burrows and Sister Wendy Beckett

WEEK THREE: "IF YOU KNEW THE GIFT OF GOD..."



Drinking the Waters of Grace in Prayer

The Gospel for the Third Sunday of Lent is the story of Jesus encountering the Samaritan woman at the well.

Here are two reflections in which Ruth Burrows and Sister Wendy Beckett use that story to present practical and life-giving wisdom on prayer.

Let me share a favourite method of my own, which has helped many others. It is closely akin to what St Teresa suggested to her novices.

Take a story from the Gospels, let us say that of Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman (Jn 4) – John's Gospel is especially helpful for prayer. There you have a wonderful verbal exchange. Read it, recall it, and then believe that you are that person whom Jesus questions and invites you to respond:

"How can I, a poverty-stricken creature, give *You* to drink?" you ask.

"You can", Jesus answers, "by asking me to give it to you".

"Help me to know who you are; help me to know, to want, to pay any price for this Gift!"

"You cannot appreciate my Gift. But ask me for it and you will infallibly receive it".

"Lord, help me! Offer, give me this living water. Draw me to yourself!"

This faith has to be maintained, no matter what our state of feeling, no matter how things *seem*. If we think about it we will realize that there is an implicit but inescapable question at stake here: "Do I believe in Jesus Christ and in what Jesus reveals of God, which is nothing other than that God is total, unconditional, Self-communicating love?"

So, at prayer we are starkly confronted with a choice: Do I stake everything on Jesus or do I choose to rely on my subjective experience?

If the above is true, then our *activity* during a period of personal prayer will consist in maintaining this choice of faith, employing whatever enables us to do this. The accent is not on *our* prayer, our "performance", but on being there, exposed to God, lovingly eager to receive God and certain that we do so, regardless of how we feel.

Ruth Burrows, *Essence of Prayer*, 177-78.



Duccio di Buoninsegna, "Christ and the Samaritan Woman"

If we feel that we are not the kind of person that is worthy of Our Lord's attention (the saints and the pope or such perhaps, but not common-or-garden us), then this is a picture to enlighten us. Jesus takes a passionate interest in, is indeed profoundly in love with, each of us. The tragedy is that this is a love we abuse. The woman here is not particularly receptive. We know that she claims Jesus convinces her, but who can tell how fully she allowed those living waters to flow, as the years went by and she did not see him again?

Grace cannot fill the dry reaches of our spirit unless we ask for it. The asking is precisely what we mean by prayer. It can be spoken, asking: "Lord, give me this water...", as the woman prays, or it can be an unspoken need, a looking at God that expresses silently all our longing. Longing need not be emotionally experienced. It is sometimes an act of the will, accepting that we are far from what God wants us to be, even from what we want ourselves to be, and acknowledging that the grace of God can transform us.

But we must take time to let the grace shine on us, to let the water seep deep within. Lent is the season when we look at our prayer habits. Is there any space in our day to be silent and let God give us grace? Even ten minutes, holding ourselves still before God, or a final act of repentance, gratitude and love before the day ends, are expressions of a need that God longs always to satisfy.