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ADDRESS
BY ARCHBISHOP OF CANTERBURY
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‘Give me a drink of water’, says Jesus to the Samaritan woman; just as, later in the same gospel, he says from the cross, ‘I am thirsty’. When he had said, ‘I am thirsty’, the evangelist tells us, and when he had received the sour drink from the soldiers’ pot, he cried, ‘It is finished’. It is as if, in both these narratives, something utterly definitive happens when Jesus declares his thirst; something is revealed.

The Samaritan woman is surprised to be asked: an enemy, a member of the aggressive majority branch of her faith, from over the border, is putting himself, even if only in a small way, at her mercy for a moment, saying, ‘I need your generosity’. This is at least part of what makes a revelatory moment. Reconciliation begins not simply with an act of goodwill from one alienated party to another but rather with a word or a gesture that gives someone the chance to become a giver. Jesus the Jew says to the Samaritan, ‘I have need of you’. In a world where Jews and Samaritans normally speak and behave as if they do not need one another, the only thing that can break the deadlock is this confession of need. ‘I can’t live without you’ is a cliché of romantic fiction; it becomes a sober and everyday fact when we are thinking of how reconciliation actually happens. The very first thing we should take from this story is the deeply challenging revelation that true communion begins when someone acknowledges need.

This is why there is no reconciliation possible in our world between powerful and powerless, historic oppressor and historic victim, simply in terms of the powerful becoming a little more benign, the oppressor relaxing their hold. With the best will in the world, this remains only another gesture from on high, unless it leads on to the moment when the powerful say, ‘We need you – not as objects, not as victims, but as people who have the dignity of giving life to us’. If we think of those who live around Jacob’s Well today, we see this clearly. How does Israel find the freedom to say to the Palestinians, ‘We need you for our life and health’? And, just to complicate things, how do the other states of the region find the freedom to say, ‘We need Israel?’ When these things are said and known, who knows what can change?

And likewise, in the global economy: it is not enough for the prosperous world and its trading systems to say, ‘We want to bring you in to the market; we want to make life better for you’. There has, finally, to be some way of saying, ‘We are hungry and thirsty for your welfare; we are not ourselves, not fully human, without you’.

But of course the gospel goes further and deeper than even all this. Jesus says, ‘If you knew who it is who is asking for a drink, you would ask *him*’. Here is the Saviour, the Anointed, asking for our help and our generosity, weary and thirsty. The evangelist means us to realise that when we see who is asking for help, we see that the intensity of divine love is such that it draws God from heaven to earth with an urgency that can only be compared with the thirst of a parched and desperate person in waterless places. This is a bold comparison, yet it is what the text invites. God’s yearning for our health and bliss is so great that it brings God to ‘lie at our feet’ in humility, as St Augustine said. It brings him to the dry desert of his agony in Gethsemane, and the bitterness of the cross. When he has cried ‘I thirst’, he has accomplished what he came to do; he has so brought from heaven to earth the yearning of God for our good, in his death as in his life, that there is no more to be said or done: it is finished. And if that is the quality and the intensity, the weight, of God’s love, we may well conclude, as Jesus tells the Samaritan woman she should, that it is we who need to be doing the asking. For us, the water that gives life and never fails is precisely that endless divine longing for our health and peace which brings God among us as a human being.

When we know that we are, each one of us, seen by God in this way, as objects of an endless passion for our good, we find life. We know, as did the Samaritan woman, that we are known thoroughly and still called and loved. And we discover in all this that as we turn to each other with our hands open to receive, we discover how ‘our life and our death are with our neighbour’, as St Antony of Egypt put it: for communion and reconciliation to happen, we must begin to *receive* ourselves from one another.

Who we are is a mysterious gift, not something we possess, understand, defend and manipulate. We find ourselves when we understand that we don’t know and need to be told who we are – when we come to drink of the waters of God’s love poured out for us. And this triggers a new receptivity to each other. As we see ourselves, mysteriously growing into life as we stand before the love of God in Jesus, we see that love and that gift waiting to be given to us in human others, even enemies; we begin to open our hands and say, ‘Give me a drink of water’. And so peace is made; the creation begins to be drawn back into communion with its maker, around the pivotal figure of the suffering, thirsty, crucified Jesus.

When we hoard our resources and defend our identities at all costs, we cut ourselves off from life. When others turn to us and ask for our attention and help, for food and water and liberty, it is not simply their lives we ruin when we refuse; it is our own. Their asking from us is an opportunity for us to ask and receive from them. It is now commonly said that the wars of the next generation will be fought over water supplies; it is already a major political issue in parts of the Middle East. Reading today’s gospel with that in mind has a painful irony: here in Scripture, the complex to and fro of the conversation about thirst and water, giving and receiving, between Jesus and the Samaritan woman is the way in which we are drawn into an understanding of God’s reconciling act in Jesus and in which we realise how we are to receive our truth and reality from the hands of God, and, under God, from each other.

So, if Jesus heals and reconciles because he is the presence on earth of God's 'thirst' for our life, our own proclamation of this has to reflect the pattern of the conversation at Jacob's Well. Like the Samaritan woman, we have to discover that the one who asks is really the one who is offering to give – to give us the freedom and the dignity to give in our turn. For the life that God wants to give is the reflection in us of God's own life, which is always an outpouring and sharing. The paradox is that we can only become attuned to this divine life as we let go of what we think we have to give, what we think we possess and might, if persuaded, decide to share. In place of this careful husbanding of our resources, we are asking to be channels of the passionate outpouring of God. It affects us as churches in Europe, as nations in Europe, as a European group in the wider world. At every level, Jesus Christ seeks to turn us around, to convert us, to his thirst, his longing for the life of the world which costs him everything. And he promises that as we are converted, we shall find our healing, our wholeness, with each other, and swim in the life-giving water of God's gift.