

Lent 3

1. On this third Sunday of Lent the readings seem to be concentrating on water. In the first reading the people are angry with Moses because he had led them into the desert and they are now dying of thirst. In the second reading from Paul's Letter to the Romans the image of water is used to describe our new life in Jesus. Paul speaks of the love of God being poured—like water--into our hearts by the Holy Spirit who has been given to us. And the Gospel from John is the story of Jesus meeting the Samaritan woman at the well of Jacob and asking her to give him a drink of water. It seems like a simple story, but, as you well know, nothing is simple in John. Nothing is to be taken at face-value. What begins as a conversation about getting some water soon becomes a dialogue about worship and the coming of the Messiah. Indeed, there are many different themes contained in this story. Therefore, let me simply take just one theme, that of thirst.

2. Both the people in the desert and, at first glance, Jesus himself were looking for water in the physical sense. But, as you well know, we use the word thirst to refer to the desires of our minds and hearts as well. For example, in psalm 42 the psalmist prays: "As the deer longs for streams of water, so my soul longs for you,

O God.” And in our gospel today Jesus speaks of a living water which satisfies a person’s thirst permanently. As it turns out, Jesus is referring to himself. To have him is to have a spring of water welling up to eternal life. St. Augustine, who drank from many wells before he found the kind of water that could permanently satisfy his intellectual, moral and spiritual cravings, wrote that now famous saying at the very beginning of his biography, the *Confessions*, which sums up his life-long search: “You have made us for Yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless till they rest in You.”

3. Doesn’t Shakespeare’s Cleopatra, just before she puts the asp to her breasts, say: “I have immortal longings”? Well, that is what Augustine was saying too. That is what the psalmist was saying as well. Our hearts—and so our desires, our thirsts—are so insatiable, so big, that nothing limited, nothing finite can satisfy them. Only God, the infinite one, can do that. And that is why there is such desperation in our souls when we try to make anything finite our God. We are asking too much of the finite thing. We are asking it to play God. We are making it an idol, a false god. We think it can do the trick for us, but it can’t. It will fail us, and great will be the ruin thereof: a human life destroyed. But, like Augustine, it takes us a long time to learn this lesson. We have to go down many

dead-ends and then turn around and find our way back to the highway. Do you remember the old pin-ball machines? The ball had to bounce off the different obstacles in its effort to get home, to get to the end of its course. We are like that. We bounce off this and that in our efforts to get to our end, which is God. Sometimes we get stuck and don't move at all. But then we start again and begin the bouncing process all over again.

4. We are ingenious in what we can make our obstacles, our idols. There are of course the standard, off the rack idols: wealth, reputation, etc. But we all have our own sorts and combinations of idols. I suppose what is most sad is when something very good, like love, whether between two people or whether the love of children and family, becomes an idol. For when we make them idols, that is, when we place them in opposition to the love of God rather than in line with love of Him, we destroy them as well as ourselves. We cease to love them truly for themselves, for their own value and worth, because we place them at the service of our self-love. So we misuse them. And then they also disappoint us because they cannot be what we ask them to be. They cannot pretend to be God.

5. Let us ask the Lord for help in identifying our tendency to make idols. Let us ask especially for help to learn to love well. It is fairly easy to see when we are making idols of things like money or reputation, but it is harder to see what we are doing when it comes to the question of loving others well. Let us ask for light and strength in this most important area of our lives: that we may love our friends well, that spouses may love each other well, that parents may love their children well. If we can do that, even though it may seem we are only thinking of ourselves and not of the larger society, we are in fact offering our society the second best gift we can give it. The first would be our faith in the love of God poured out into our hearts by the Holy Spirit. The second is the example of a life lived out according to this faith. But in offering it this second gift, we are inviting it to share its source, the best of all gifts, belief in the love of God poured into our hearts, that spring of water welling up to eternal life.