

**Reflection on the Gospel-Third Sunday of Lent Year A
(John 4:5-42)**

-Veronica Lawson RSM

Those privileged to act as catechists in the RCIA program over the Lenten period will be introducing the candidates to some of our most treasured gospel stories. In 1963, Vatican II's *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* called for the restoration of certain early Church practices. The two main features of Lent, baptism and penance, were to be given greater emphasis in the liturgy and in liturgical catechesis. More use was to be made of the baptismal elements proper to the Lenten liturgy. Some features that were part of an earlier tradition were to be restored. In response to this call, John's stories of the Samaritan woman, the man born blind and the raising of Lazarus were moved from the weekday to the Sunday liturgy.

Thus, three weeks into Lent, the liturgy invites us to take a faith journey in the company of a courageous outsider, an unnamed woman from a despised religious group. She moves from bewilderment and misunderstanding to faith in Jesus and engagement in mission. The pursuit of water, a key baptismal symbol in the gospel tradition, provides the catalyst for a whole education in faith. A woman of Samaria comes to draw water from the well of Jacob, Israel's great ancestor in faith. Jesus asks for a drink and elicits a bewildered response from the woman. Jews do not associate with Samaritans, the narrator explains. The woman's response provides the opportunity for Jesus to move into an extended and constantly deepening exchange in which she proves herself as a knowledgeable theologian and worthy dialogue partner.

Commentators tend to focus on the woman's marital status, usually in negative terms. Because she has had five husbands, many presume that she is a sinner although there is nothing in the text to support this position. Successive husbands may have died. Financial, religious or societal constraints may have functioned in her decision to remarry. The 'husbands' may symbolise the strange gods that claimed the allegiance of the Samaritans. There is no consensus among scholars.

At the outset, the woman views Jesus simply as a Jew who contravenes custom by asking her for water. She comes to accept him as the provider of living water. Jesus understands her life story and opens up the way for her to accept him as a prophet. She risks sharing her own convictions about the locus of worship and is gifted with new understanding and Jesus' further self-disclosure. She leaves her water jar behind and brings others to faith in Jesus as Messiah and saviour of the world.