

Sermon on John 4, 5-26

In Morning Prayer that was planned in the Groninger Martinikerk,
Sunday Oculi, 15th of March 2020

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the holy Spirit. Amen.

About 'spirituality'. A fashionable word. Lots of people are in search of it. Look at the Bookshops! Apparently, we find that life is more than the physical existence and the factual world around us. Moreover, many of us are not content with a matter of fact approach to who we are and how we ought to live.

The Church has a long tradition in mysticism. It's very close to spirituality. Mysticism has an expression for spirituality: it's drinking from the well. Drinking not so much from a physical well, but a spiritual one. This well is God himself. We read about it in both today's lessons:

Exodus 7, 1-7 and St. John 4, 5-26.

Let's turn to the Exodus story first. It is about a people, just delivered from Egypt. There is no water and they grumble to Moses, to God, because they are thirsty. Then, in God's name Moses strikes the rock and water comes out. It's a story about physical water. But it has a deeper meaning. It is about men and women that are at their wits' end, not knowing where to go, how to get any further, what their future is going to be. They are spiritually dry. And the water from the well stands for the inspiration, the encouragement, the spiritual direction that is given to them through Moses, God's servant.

The same two-level language we find in St. John's gospel. Jesus is on his way from Jerusalem to Galilee, probably after Easter. Most Jews would travel a long way to avoid going into Samaria. But Jesus doesn't. He is not afraid of meeting Samaritans – considered by Jews half heathens – or even having discussions with them. There he takes a rest, beside a well. It's an old well. Jacob, the Patriarch, dug it, centuries ago. It still holds water, but you have to lower your bucket very deep, indeed, to get it.

Then a woman comes to draw water. There is something suspicious about her, for two reasons. She comes in the heat of the day: doesn't want to meet other women. And the fact that a man is sitting there, doesn't hold her back. She is beyond all propriety and gossip.

She is like the well: her life has come to a standstill. It is exactly that which is pointed out, when she meets Jesus.

Our life can come to a standstill, for personal reasons, through difficult experiences. At present even our community life comes to a standstill because of the coronavirus. Holding meetings is discouraged, schools have shut down, even church services have been cancelled. No Morning Prayer in the Martinikerk, it gives me a sad and empty feeling! Fortunately, lots of people can keep in touch through internet or via social media. It is the elderly we should be concerned about. Not just because of the danger of infection but also because they are liable to getting cut off from normal contact and becoming lonely.

People's lives can come to a standstill for political reasons, because of other people, other countries not taking their responsibility. I mean the refugees in the most inhuman circumstances in camps in Syria, on Lesbos and other Greek Islands. We all know about the children, women and men there. It sometimes makes us look the other way, because their situation makes us feel so powerless and

despondent. How can we build a better world, a global community in which such a tragedy will never happen again? The world itself seems to have come to a standstill in that respect.

Jesus, on the other hand, stands for streaming water, not stagnant but living. He recognizes the Samaritan woman for whom she is: a lonely, abandoned woman, who has no future to look forward to. That is other people's doing as well as her own! It is fate and deed at the same time. But Jesus doesn't condemn her, thereby breaking through this mechanism and bringing her into the light. He gives her the living water that she needs. From then on she is liberated. She is no longer ashamed of herself but knows herself to be accepted in the sight of God. In the second half of John's story she even spreads the message of the Messiah and other Samaritans believe her, the once despised woman!

We often look for spirituality in ourselves. A hidden well of knowledge, of wisdom, of faith, that helps us to understand life and the world better than we used to do and to hold a balance in it. Spirituality in the biblical sense is something that is given to you, reaches you from the outside. It awakens knowledge, wisdom, faith which you did not know you had in you. This 'something' is a force, a power that is never static but always dynamic. It urges you to reach out. It drives you across borders and beyond boundaries. It brings you into contact with others, often the most unexpected and unsought for 'other'. It sends you on your way towards others. Your neighbours in the literal sense: people in this time of the corona pandemia in danger of getting left to themselves. You may ring them up, listen or have a long talk through the telephone, offer your help. It is easily done but of vital importance. And your neighbours miles away: refugees, victims of war and injustice. Pray for them, be aware of what they have to go through, help the organisations that try to help them. Jesus gives living water. Or rather, he himself is the living water. Living in relation with him makes us different human beings. Human beings reaching out to others, pilgrims on the way to God's future.

Amen.

– *Rudolf Oosterdijk*