

**Reflection on the Alternative Gospel-3rd Week in Lent
(John 4:1-42)**

-Veronica Lawson RSM

A woman of Samaria comes to draw water from the well of Jacob, Israel's great ancestor in faith. This Samaritan woman, known as Photina in the Eastern Churches, is a water bearer. She belongs in a long line of women whose lot as women is to undertake the burdensome, often dangerous daily toil of carrying water so that their families might simply survive. Jesus asks the woman for a drink and elicits a bewildered response. Her response, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?", provides the opportunity for Jesus to move into an extended and constantly deepening exchange in which the woman proves herself a knowledgeable and worthy dialogue partner. The pursuit of water, a key baptismal symbol in the gospel tradition, provides the catalyst for Photina's journey to faith in Jesus as the Messiah or Christ and her engagement in the mission of proclaiming the good news to her people.

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 refer to 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 breaks with established 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.

As we work together to address issues relating to water in our times, we might bring the implied words of Jesus at the well *I thirst*, his spoken words from the cross *I thirst* and the implied thirst of Photina, the woman of Samaria, into dialogue with the thirst of the 750 million on our planet who yearn for clean drinking water. Reflection on their plight reminds us that water is God's gift to the whole Earth community. As gift, it is to be received graciously and respectfully. It is indeed the water *of life* since there is no life on Earth without water. Let us take the water of life, but let us not take more than our share, for that would be to forget that it is gift. Let us take it, but let us not take it for granted.