

Septuagesima 2008

*“And all did eat the same spiritual food, and all drank the same spiritual drink;
(and they drank of the spiritual rock that followed them;
and the rock was Christ).”
(1 Corinthians 10.4)*

The season of Septuagesima leads us to the penitential season of Lent at the end of which we have Passiontide ending in the glorious resurrection of our Saviour. The Liturgy introduces us to the depth of man's fallen state and the passage of humanity from the state of decadence and slavery in which it had been placed by sin to that of being raised up and set free which only God can grant it. The opening words of the Mass are a petition from the heart of fallen mankind: “The sorrows of death surrounded me, the sorrow of hell encompassed me; and in my affliction I called upon the Lord, and He heard my voice from His Holy Temple.”

We began by quoting those words of St Paul so full of mystery — “and they drank of the spiritual rock which followed them; and the rock was Christ.” This perhaps tells of God's pursuing the precious souls of mankind that He created a little lower than the Angels. But our Holy Father Pope Benedict treats of this scripture, and it will be good to take advantage and benefit from some of his thoughts.



It was “about the midst of the feast of tabernacles. Jesus went up into the Temple and taught ... and on the last and great day of the festivity, Jesus stood and cried out, saying: if any man thirst let him come to me and drink ... he that believeth in Me, as the scripture saith, Out of his heart shall flow rivers of living water.”

In the background is the ritual of the feast, which prescribed that participants should draw water from the spring at Siloam to offer a water libation in the Temple on each of the seven days of the feast. On the seventh day, the priests processed seven times around the altar holding a golden water vessel before ritually pouring out its contents. The feast began as an invocatory petition for rain. But the ritual was then transformed into a remembrance of a piece of salvation history, of the water from the rock that, in spite of all their doubts and fears, God gave the Jews as they wandered in the desert. Finally the gift of water from the rock became a motif of Messianic hope. Moses had given Israel bread from heaven and water from the rock as the people wandered in the desert. On this pattern, the new Moses, the Messiah, was expected to give

these two essential gifts of life as well. This messianic interpretation of the gift of water is reflected in those words of St Paul's Epistle.

In the words that Jesus speaks during the water ritual, He responds to this hope: He is the new Moses — spoken of by the prophets in the early Scriptures. He himself is the life-giving rock. Just as in the bread discourse He reveals Himself as the true bread that comes from heaven, He shows himself here — just as He had done with the Samaritan woman — as the living water that is the goal of man's deeper thirst, the thirst for life, for "life in abundance". This life is no longer conditioned by need that must constantly be satisfied, but it springs up from within, from deep inside itself. Jesus also answers the questions as to how one drinks this living water, how one gets to the well and draws from it, by saying, "He who believes in Me...." Faith in Jesus is the way we drink the living water, the way we drink life that is no longer threatened by death. Faith in Jesus must be a faith that is total and without reserve, like that of Simon Peter, "Thou art the Christ the Son of the living God" — and it is He who will be with the Church always as head of the Mystical Body, acting on this earth through the Vicar He appointed giving him the fullness of His own authority. Now notice the words of Jesus: "As the Scripture has said, 'Out of his body shall flow rivers of living water.'" It is documented by Justin (d. 165), Irenaeus, Hypolytus, Cyprian, and Ephraim of Syria, all early Fathers of the Church, that "out of His body" refers to Christ Himself — He who thirsts, let him come to Me; and let him who believes in Me drink it. The important key to the interpretation of this passage lies in the phrase "as the Scripture says". Jesus attaches great importance to being in continuity with the Scripture, in continuity with God's history with mankind; He is the focal point in terms of which the overall coherence of Scripture comes to light — everything is waiting for Him, everything is moving towards Him.

But where does Scripture speak of this living spring? The principal clues: The story of water issuing from the rock, a story that became the image of hope in Israel. Then in Ezekiel (47 v.1) we have a vision of the new Temple. "And behold water was issuing from below the threshold of the Temple, towards the East." A good fifty years later Zechariah (13.v.1) returned to the image: "On the day there shall be a fountain opened for the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem to cleanse them from sin and uncleanness" — and again (14.v8) "On that day living waters shall flow out from Jerusalem." Finally the Apocalypse (22.v1) manifests the full greatness of these images for the first time: "Then he showed me the river of the water of life bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb." And in the official prayer of the Church on the feast of St Pope Clement I, the third successor of St Peter: "While, on the way to his martyrdom, St Clement was praying, the Lamb of God appeared to him, standing upon the mountain, and at His feet a bubbling fountain of fresh water was flowing; there is a stream whose runlets gladden the City of God.

The Blessed Virgin, the perfect reflection, and therefore the perfect example, of the faith and obedience of her divine Son that we should imitate, was a silent witness at the foot of the Cross; it is St John who tells us that a soldier

opened the side of Christ, the new Temple, with a spear; and there immediately came out Blood and Water. It is Jesus Christ who in “loving to the end” endured the Cross and now lives with a life that can never now be threatened by death; and (John 19. v34) shows the body of Jesus to be the real Temple, built not of stone nor by human hands; hence – because it signifies the living indwelling of God in the world – it is, and will remain, the source of life for all ages.