

Where do you take your thirst?

Matt was the second oldest of 12 children in Dublin, Ireland. They would have been a well off family but his dad spent all his money on alcohol. His dad was a drunk and an alcoholic and all his other brothers became alcoholics too. This instability led to Matt's spontaneous attendance at school and sadly at the age of 12 he left school altogether to go to work at the worst place possible for him: a wine seller.

He probably began drinking occasionally at the wine seller. But soon he probably found comfort in the alcohol, developed a THIRST for that drink, found freedom from the instability at home, freedom from the pain. By the age of 14 he was a full fledge alcoholic, and his THIRST for alcohol was insatiable.

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We hear in the Gospel today of a woman who took her thirst to the regular place where most people went to fulfill their thirst: the well. Notice the peculiarity of the situation though. This woman is coming to the well at high noon, and if you have ever been in a hot climate in south America, Middle East or Asia, high noon is prime time for a siesta! It is so hot there that most people avoid that time. So why is she there?

In the conversation with Jesus it is revealed that this woman lived in a unique situation. She has had five husbands and now she was living with a sixth man who is not her husband. In a time when villages were small, the whole town probably knew about her situation and so this woman is coming to the well when no one else is around to avoid all that shame.

Although she was coming to the well to quench her natural thirst, the conversation with Jesus revealed that she had a deeper thirst. She was longing for intimacy, longing to be known and to know another, yet due to some brokenness in her life, due to some of the lies she has believed about herself, she has ventured from one man to another trying to satiate her desire, trying to satisfy her thirst.

Matt and this Samaritan woman are similar in some respects. Matt eventually gave into his addiction to alcohol and would regularly drink with his dad and his brothers at O'Meara's pub. His sole goal in life was to drink. When he would run out of money, he would sell his coat and his shoes just to be able to get a drink. He got so desperate at one point that he actually stole a fiddler from a blind beggar just to service his addiction.

Where did Matt and the Samaritan woman take their thirst?

They took it to the things of this world. See there are three ways in which we can direct our desires and we become one of three persons. Christopher West talks about THE ADDICT, THE STOIC and THE MYSTIC.

When we take all of our desire and direct solely at the things of this world, we become the ADDICT. Matt would drink more and more, but then he would be less and less satisfied. The reason behind this is that we were all created with this deep desire, this aching thirst for the infinite. It is like a raging fire but when we take the desire for the infinite towards finite things, they fail to satisfy. "Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again" (Jn 4:13). That is how one can become THE ADDICT (taking the infinite to the finite).

However, we think that the response to this is repressing our desires, i.e., becoming THE STOIC. The stoic is the one who sees that all desire, all thirsting is bad, and there is a grain of truth to that. Indeed, disordered desire is bad, the disordered desire for alcohol, the disordered desire for sex, the disordered desire for skittles/chocolate, yes these are bad! But the response of the STOIC to these desires is to repress ANY desire for alcohol, sex or skittles. ALL desire is bad so they throw the baby out with the bath water. Unfortunately, many people associate the Catholic Church with the STOICS. "It's all about following rules, just keep your desires down because if you open it up its gonna be all bad, and just be calm and nice little boys and girls!"

Here is an example to reinforce what I mean. A new hobby that I have picked up is cooking. I guess it is a survival thing too but I love cooking now! I've tried to cook several different things, I've made some Vietnamese Pho, I've made chili for the next month. But the latest thing I have made that I love is bacon carbonara. It took some time for me to get it right but it is good. It's so good that even though I'm Vietnamese I'm starting to think I'm half Italian.

But here is the point: when I eat that delicious bacon carbonara I can do one of three things. 1) that desire for it was so good that I keep gorging myself with it and take my desire for the infinite towards it (THE ADDICT). 2) that desire for it was so good that I am afraid where it will lead me so I never eat it again. I repress all of my desire. (THE STOIC). 3) Or I realize that the desire for the bacon carbonara is good and is a sign post for something greater. I take that desire and see it as a type of icon, a type of sacrament which points me to heaven where we will all partake of the wedding banquet of heaven.

Do you see the difference between the ADDICT, the STOIC and the MYSTIC? The problem is not necessarily with desire itself but to where it is directed. Disordered desire is disordered because it is not ordered toward heaven, directed toward God, directed toward our destiny. And so Christopher West would talk about directing our desires toward our destiny. Living in 3D.

Our desire, our thirst is that drive that God put into us to move us towards him. St. Bonaventure write: "for no one is in any way disposed for mystical ecstasy unless...he is a man of desires." St. Augustine writes: "the whole life of a good Christian is a holy longing." Finally, St Catherine of Siena: "If you would make progress...you must be thirsty, because...those who are not thirsty will never persevere in their journey."

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Our culture says that the way to find freedom and happiness is to give in to all your desires (ordered and disordered). Do what you want, with whoever you want, whenever you want. But this road leads to slavery and despair.

The temptation is to bottle ourselves away from everything and in some circumstances it is necessary to remove temptation to sin, protect our children, to regain control over ourselves again. But to live a life where our desires are completely and always repressed—that is not how God designed us because then we also repress the desire for God himself which he has implanted within us.

Ah! But to open your heart, to increase your thirst, increase your desire for the infinite, to unleash your desire for God, for heaven like a raging fire...that is the life we are called to live.

Matt eventually hit a low point—rock bottom. He had no money and he waited outside a bar hoping one of his friends would buy him just one drink, just one. But as the hours passed by waiting outside, none of them bought him anything. He was abandoned. So he went home, made a promise to his mom to be sober for 3 months, and received confession for the first time in years. He now used his money to pay back the bars he owed money for drinking, he even tried for seven years to find that man whose fiddler he stole and he could not find him and offered masses for his soul.

His life was changed completely. When his friends would go to the bar he would go Mass instead. When they observed him at prayer, it seemed like he was in ecstasy. His mother would observe him transfixed in prayer in the middle of the night. He eventually passed away on June 7<sup>th</sup>, 1925 due to a heart attack but he passed away on the way to mass.

We see a man who thirsted so much for a drink from the bottle, a man who was an ADDICT, but he didn't just repress his desires like a STOIC. He took his unquenchable thirst and desire and directed straight to our Lord in the Mass like a MYSTIC, like the Samaritan woman who said: "Sir, give me this water always, so that I may never be thirsty." Now his cause for canonization is opened, he is known as venerable Matt Talbot, and he is on his way to becoming a canonized saint.

So where will you take your thirst?