I. Introduction

Most of us have heard of Helen Keller—a remarkable woman who had many obstacles to overcome in life, and did so with courage and determination. She was born 140 years ago, in 1880, but before she was two years old she suffered from an illness that left her permanently blind and deaf. Because she couldn’t hear, she wasn’t able to imitate sounds, and thus couldn’t speak. Yet, by the time she died in 1968, Helen Keller had graduated with honor from college, became a popular author, was the guest of every American president from Grover Cleveland to John F. Kennedy, and served as an inspiration to people throughout the world.

The turning point in Helen’s life came at the age of seven, when she was a stubborn and undisciplined little girl unable to communicate with the world. Her private tutor, a young woman named Ann Sullivan, had taught her a little bit of sign language, spelling out words in Helen’s hand—but she hadn’t been able to get further than that because of Helen’s unwillingness to cooperate. Then one spring day the two of them went for a walk, and came to a well where someone was pumping water. Ann took one of Helen’s hands and held it under the cool stream, and in the other hand spelled out “water.” A transformation took place; as Helen described years later in her autobiography, “Suddenly the mystery of language was revealed to me. I knew then that ‘w-a-t-e-r’ meant the wonderful cool something that was flowing over my hand. That living word awakened my soul, gave it light, hope, joy, set it free!” Helen Keller was filled with an intense desire to learn, think, and discover, and her life was changed forever (Mark Link, S.J, Illustrated Sunday Homilies, Year A, Series II, p. 23).

We might say that Helen had an experience of grace, or of being touched by God. Water is a wonder symbol of such an experience, for it cleanses, refreshes, and gives life. This is true in a physical sense, for water is the single most important element of our bodies; it’s also true in a spiritual sense, for we have been reborn in the waters of baptism. We all have an inner thirst, and the more fully we live, the more we become aware of it. Through faith we discover that our deepest needs are met most fully when we’re in touch with God.

II. Development

The Samaritan woman mentioned in the Gospel was not physically blind like Helen Keller, but she was spiritually blind. She was living in sin, but when Jesus spoke to her of living water, she immediately recognized her need for it and expressed this desire. The woman accepted Jesus as the Messiah, and her life was forever changed—and just as Helen Keller became an inspiration to many people, many Samaritans came to believe in Our Lord because of the woman’s testimony. God’s word gives life, and in the 1st Reading the physical thirst quenched in the desert symbolizes the Lord’s ability and desire
to quench our spiritual thirst. God will do whatever is necessary, as proven by the fact that even though we were sinners unworthy of any consideration, Jesus died for our salvation. Thus, as St. Paul tells us in the Letter to the Romans, “the love of God has been poured out into our hearts . . . .” As long as our hearts are open, God will fill them with His light and grace and life.

III. Conclusion

This raises the question: Are our hearts open? Do we truly want to grow in God’s grace, or are we content to have things more or less stay as they are? Lent is a time for honest self-examination, a time to review our priorities and to take stock of our spiritual progress. For instance, we say we want God to guide us throughout our lives. Do we therefore take the practical steps of spending some time in prayer each day, or perhaps doing some spiritual reading during Lent, and of occasionally going off by ourselves to reflect on where our lives are going? We say we want to grow in God’s grace. Do we try to put this desire into practice, perhaps by working to overcome one of our faults during Lent, by consciously trying to form good habits, and by receiving the Sacraments regularly? We say we want to love our neighbor and get along with others. Do we give actual signs of this—perhaps by helping others whenever we have the opportunity to do so, by forgiving those who offend us, and by giving an example of genuine faith and commitment?

Writing many years later of the moment her life was transformed, Helen Keller said, “Once I knew only darkness and stillness . . . my life was without a past and future . . . but a little word from the fingers of another fell into my hand that clutched at emptiness, and my heart leaped to the rapture of living.” Jesus stands ready to do this service for us, and He wants us in turn to offer this same gift to anyone we encounter who may be in need of it. If we came across someone in the desert dying of thirst, and we had an extra canteen full of water, we would certainly share it. Sometimes we have the opportunity to do this in a spiritual sense, as Ann Sullivan did for young Helen Keller. Our willingness to speak of what Jesus has done for us, our words of encouragement, and our helping hand, may just make a lasting difference in the life of someone without hope.

Archbishop Vigneron, in his pastoral letter Unleash the Gospel, echoes the call of Pope Francis for all Catholics to become a “band of joyful missionary disciples,” helping change the world by the practice of their faith. This is a very practical goal, for sooner or later we’ll likely encounter someone who—like the Samaritan woman—is searching for the truth and ready to hear and accept it. We have received those life-giving waters only Jesus can provide, and if we are truly living as His followers, we will freely and happily share the gift we have been given.