

Truth lies at the bottom of a deep well.

(c. 2001)

“As a child, they could not keep me from wells.” So begins a poem by the Irish poet Seamus Heaney. *I loved the dark drop, the trapped sky . . . / I savored the rich crash when a bucket / Plummeted down at the end of a rope. / So deep you saw no reflection in it.* Wells have fascinated human beings from as far back as we can remember, probably because there’s something mysterious about a deep, dark shaft that reaches down to hidden waters - as though it were a corridor to the very Source of the universe. Hence the popular belief in wishing wells. There’s one old well near the river Tyne in England out of which archeologists have retrieved close to 13,500 coins dating from between 41 and 383 AD - no doubt tossed into the well to obtain a favor from some pre-Christian deity.

But Christians were hardly to be outdone in this regard. There are sacred wells all over Europe to which pilgrims travel to this very day to seek beneficial contact with not just the bottom of a well but the Foundation and Wellspring of all creation, God. In Kildare there’s St. Bridget’s Well and in Wales there’s St. David’s Well and the famous Well of St. Winifred dating back some twelve hundred years.

And think how often wells are featured in the Bible! For instance, there’s the story of Sarah’s maid Hagar and her infant son Ishmael, who were left alone to die in the desert, when along came an angel to point out a well which saved their lives. And then there’s Jacob’s Well beside which Jesus conversed with that Samaritan woman. Jacob’s Well was more than a source of water to the Samaritans. Reaching down into it, they were reaching not only for water but symbolically reaching down through time itself to Jacob and the God of Jacob, the wellspring of their religious heritage. The Gospel of John also mentions the healing pool of Bethesda and the pool of Siloam to which Jesus sent a blind man to wash and regain his sight.

Of course, we live in a secular age that smiles at belief in wishing wells. But are wishing wells really out of date? What are all the sciences and humanities taught at our secular universities but wishing wells of a sort? Aren’t geologists and philosophers and biologists and geneticists and anthropologists and paleontologists and psychologists all peering into matter and back through time, seeking the origin, the meaning of life and this universe, looking for some wellspring? And what’s a telescope but a kind of well down which astronomers gaze at our starry past to relieve our ignorance about what we are if not who we are? Or take literature and poetry. What are they but attempts to plumb the mysteries of nature and human existence? Seamus Heaney admits he has become too old to go bending Narcissus-like over literal wells. It’s beneath his adult dignity. Instead, he says, *I rhyme / To see myself, to set the darkness echoing.*

As for me, I’m not that modern or secular that I would forego a chance to visit one of those pilgrimage wells like St. Winifred’s to make a wish. I’m still Catholic enough to think sacramentally and see in all things great and small some glimmer of the spiritual origin of our world. And wells must especially have that quality, considering that Jesus chose one day to say of himself: “Let anyone who thirsts come to me and

drink” and thereby described himself a wellspring out of which all humanity might experience the true meaning of life. And then he went on to say, “Whoever believes in me, as scripture says: ‘Rivers of living water will flow from within him.’” And what does that mean but that, our thirst relieved by Christ, we may ourselves become wishing wells, each a source of profound spiritual refreshment to all who come in contact with us?