

DAILY OFFERING – 8



Diego Valezquez, Water Seller of Seville, 1620, Apsley House, London

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Painted in his native Saville when he was still very young, Valezquez took the picture with him when he was summoned to Madrid to work for the king. It eventually found its way into the Spanish royal collection; it was stolen by Joseph Bonaparte at the time of the Napoleonic wars and 'won' by the Duke of Wellington at the Battle of Vitoria. A curious and blood-stained provenance for a painting of quiet stillness.

As we draw towards the end of this series, we behold a painting which appears to have no religious substance ... and yet.

We have before us an astonishing picture with a near photographic realism, and it has been this extraordinary rendering of the mundane that singled this work out. The still life detail is compelling: the droplets of water that cling to the earthenware flagon, the potter's markings on the wall of the vessel, where the pot was turned on a wheel, the dimpling of the smaller pot, and the clouding of the glass goblet, rendered with jewel like beading on the bowl. This is exquisite art – art as artifice, but it isn't what this painting is about.

In the western world the gift of water is taken for granted but in so much of the world it is, sadly, another story. Water is, for many, a scarce resource just as it was in Andalusia four centuries ago. Water sellers would fill their large earthenware bottles at the public fountain, load them into wooden frames, to be carried by mules. This was poor man's work, hard labour offering little reward.

Let's return to our painting, and begin by observing the significant absence: there is no indication of payment here, nothing to suggest this is transactional. Look first at the water seller. He is old, fallen jawed, downward looking, his torn leather smock not unlike a chasuble. He is presented in profile, left hand resting on the water jar, his right hand holding the base of the goblet, as the celebrant would hold a chalice. The boy, serious and silent, wraps his fore-finger around the stem, but the glass remains in the control of the old man, the light plays through the glass and reveals a fig.

Now the fig has functional purpose here, as a perfumer intended to make the water taste fresher (something still done in Seville today, apparently). But it also has scriptural significance. If we turn to the Parable of the Budding Fig Tree, we may call to mind Jesus words "... you know that the kingdom of God is near" (Luke 21:29-33). Perhaps at this point we begin to see the painting differently, to detect that within the ordinary, we might find the sacred. We are coming to see, as it were, a secular sacrament.

There is ministry here, with a firm scriptural foundation:

"Truly I tell you, anyone who gives you a cup of water in my name because you belong to the Messiah will certainly not lose their reward." Mark 9: 41

And for us, here and now, a pointer, a marker along the way. We are called to make a sacrament of our lives – in the small acts, the kindnesses given, the quiet sharing, in the offering of self. In all there is 'Kingdom come' value and in doing small acts we are not alone – for the promised Spirit rests upon us, all.