

Cracked Cisterns

by Fr. Jim Schmitmeyer

Back in the Midwest, in the early 1800's, a system of canals was constructed to provide transportation and trade to the settlers west of the Alleghany Mountains. I grew up hearing stories from my grandmother about the Miami-Erie Canal which connected Cincinnati, on the Ohio River, to Toledo on Lake Erie. This canal brought German farmers to clear the forests and establish the communities where most of my family continues to live to this day.

My grandmother remembered the day that the great bells of St. Michael's Church arrived on a canal boat. She also remembered an abandoned hotel that stood along the canal's tow path, miles from the closest road.

One day, I saddled up my horse and went looking for the ruins of this old hotel. It took some time, but eventually, I located a stone foundation wall beneath a thicket of brambles and mulberry trees. Not far away, I discovered a well. It no longer held any water, but the circular wall of chiseled stone still stood straight as a plumb line.

I can't help but think of that stone well whenever I read the passage about cisterns built by God's people in the days of the Prophet Jeremiah. Those cisterns, built at a time when Israel and her leaders dismissed the Law of the Lord and worshipped false gods, had all cracked and held no water. When vanquished by their enemies and forced into exile, the prophet used those dry cisterns to symbolize what happens when God's people put more faith in their own technology in place of His holiness and wisdom.

Fortunately, the settlers who arrived on the canal boats built other fountains beside wells like the one I discovered next to the ruins of an old hotel. They also built churches. And inside their beautiful churches are fountains of life-giving water that continue to flow to this day: baptismal fonts that renew the Church in each generation, bringing the Word and Wisdom of God into a world that thirsts for truth, justice and peace.

But, like the people of Israel, the allure of idolatry also remains. We might not worship false gods in temples of stone, but the temptation to center one's life on something other than the one, true God is strong in today's society.

The next time you bless yourself with holy water at the door of your parish church or within the walls of your own home, keep in mind that some cisterns end up getting cracked, but the water that flows from the font of Baptism never runs dry.

