

Living Water. Lent 3 (*John 4, 5-42*)

Water. We can't do without it. We take it for granted – just turn the tap. We only notice it when we can't get it – when the main is cut off for repairs; or in the middle of a desert and our water-bottle empty, with no Moses to hand. Or when there's too much of it, like a burst main or a flooding river.

Today's long Gospel reading raises such big issues, so many interesting details, it's hard to know where to start. But it starts from water – the ordinary physical need for water – with Jesus tired and resting by Jacob's well. They're travelling back to Galilee through Samaria, the disciples off into the town to buy food. Samaritans were despised and shunned by Jews as 'unclean'. The hatred went back centuries, when Jews in the area intermarried with foreign settlers planted there by the conquering Assyrians. Their cultures grew apart, and there were differences in religion, especially over where the centre of worship should be.

A Samaritan woman comes to get water from the well, and Jesus asks her for a drink. Already he has broken several powerful taboos. Jews don't speak to Samaritans unless they have to, let alone ask a favour of one; *let alone* share a drinking vessel with one. What's more, a woman on her own, and he a man on his own – altogether unthinkable! Except to Jesus, who can comfortably cross borders and separation walls of race and religion, class and culture. It's odd this woman has come alone in the midday sun, not with other women in the cool of the day. Maybe Jesus senses she's a bit of an outcast in her own community. She's surprised that he asks her for water; and more surprised when he says that if she knew the gift of God, *she* would have asked *him* for a drink, and he'd have given her 'living water'. She's now bewildered: 'Sir, you've got no bucket, and the well's deep. Where do you get that living water?' It could be mocking, but it seems Jesus is aware that she's genuinely curious.

He explains that if you drink the water he gives, you will never be thirsty. It will become in you 'a spring of water gushing up to eternal life'. 'Sir, give me this water...' she replies, even though she doesn't really understand – it should stop her having to trek out here to the well every day! ... I wonder, how do we understand that offer? When did we last feel that spring of living water within us? If it all seems a bit distant and theoretical, how can we use this time of Lent to get in touch with that potential spring of living water within?

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Jesus then tells her to go and fetch her husband. She has to confess that she has no husband; to which Jesus responds with mysterious knowledge that she's had five husbands but the current one is not her husband. 'Sir, I see that you are a prophet.' She's impressed, as well as embarrassed; then she unexpectedly brings up the controversy about where the real temple should be – on their ancestral site, Mt Gerazim, or the upstart Mt Zion at Jerusalem. But it's a real burning issue for Samaritans, and if he's a prophet perhaps he can shed some light ... His reply lifts the discussion to a different level: 'The hour is coming when you'll worship the Father

neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem ...the hour is coming, *and is now here*, when true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and in truth... God is spirit, so those who worship him must worship in spirit and in truth'. Perhaps this passage has become over-familiar, like so much of our worship. But 'in spirit and in truth' – that's a big ask.

Again, Lent is a good time to take stock. To ask ourselves if we are being true to God in worship, by being *true to ourselves*? And has the real *spirit of it*, which may have felt so powerful in the past, somehow worn off? The familiarity of words and ceremonial actions can be a help to sensing God's presence, or it can become a problem – of over-familiarity, of mere routine. Maybe it's theological concepts we don't understand, or don't feel are relevant to life as we know it, or simply don't believe (the resurrection of the *body*?). We can get irritated by the 'wrong' tune to this hymn, or feel unable to sing verse 3 in that one; find the incense uplifting, or a distracting fuss. Or more seriously, so disagree with a sermon that you want to get up and object; or find that receiving the sacrament has itself become an empty routine. You almost certainly aren't the only one to have at least one of these or similar problems. But what are clergy, and Readers, *for* – let alone study groups or Pilgrim courses or trusted Christian friends – if not to try and help?

Briefly back to the story. The woman's trying hard, but still hasn't really understood – can we blame her? So she says that she 'knows Messiah is coming; he will proclaim all things to us'. To this touching degree of faith Jesus makes an astonishing response: 'I am he, the one who is speaking to you.' Nowhere else in the Gospels does he make this so explicit – at least until he is questioned by the High Priest at his trial, and even then the wording is uncertain. And it goes against so many indications that he didn't want that title bandied about (probably because it would arouse false expectations – Messiah as nationalist leader to rebel against Rome). But, John believes, he said it to this untouchable Samaritan woman with her immoral lifestyle

Anyway, off she goes to the town: 'come and see a man who told me everything I've ever done! He can't be Messiah, can he?' They go to have a look; and were so impressed they asked him to stay with them; and they came to believe – no longer from the woman's report but by hearing Jesus for themselves. They came to 'know that this is truly the Saviour of the world.' So, the mission has been extended to the most unlikely people, the Samaritans; who responded with that strongest affirmation yet, of faith in Jesus as Christ and Saviour of the world.

I'll leave that important bit about the food, and interesting details about the harvest image. But do try to follow the example of that woman in *seeking*, even if not yet finding – seeking that promised spring of living water within us. And how to ensure that in our worship we find, or recover, that real sense of *being true*, and being 'in spirit'. There's still plenty of Lent to come; but the seeking needn't stop with Easter...

Harold Stringer