

Water is very interesting stuff. It's very simple chemically – one atom of oxygen and two of hydrogen, or H₂O. But it doesn't behave like lots of other things. There are three 'states of matter' – ways in which something can exist: solid, liquid and gas, and water is just about the only one which can be found in all three forms under 'normal' conditions. Solid water is ice – or snow, which we had last Wednesday. Liquid water is all around, in the sea, in rivers, in the rain. Water as a gas can be seen as the steam whenever we boil a kettle, or naturally rising from hot springs. Most materials shrink when they cool down – water expands, which is why frozen pipes burst (although you don't notice until the ice melts and the liquid water comes out of the cracks). Most materials are heavier when solid – ice is lighter than water and floats on it. The entire surface of our planet has been shaped by water: broken up by water getting into soil and rocks, dissolving minerals and breaking the structure up by freezing and thawing; and scraped and eroded by rain, rivers, sea and glaciers. It's tough stuff. But perhaps the most important thing about water is that it is essential for life for all known living organisms. Nothing, ultimately, can live without water. Some plants and animals can protect themselves from drought and dehydration for years, but people are not very good at this. If we don't get water for more than a few days we will die. Most people won't last more than a week; the longest known survivor was an Austrian man who was locked in a police cell and forgotten about – he was found eighteen days later, just on the brink of death.

Imagine yourself as one of the Israelites in our first reading. You've just escaped from Egypt, which was pretty tough, you've crossed the River Jordan and you're now trekking slowly across the desert towards Mount Sinai, where God will give Moses the ten commandments (although none of you know this yet). The Wilderness of Sin is a place, by the way, not some sort of metaphor for wrongdoing. You're going pretty slowly because you've got old people with you, and cattle and sheep, and children, and pregnant women. It's rocky, sandy, dry desert, and it's hot. There are no rivers and no obvious water. You had some full waterskins when you set out, but you've drunk what was in them. You get thirsty. Then you get very thirsty. Everyone gets extremely thirsty, they get headaches; they get dizzy; some people start hallucinating. You are all getting very angry with the man who is leading you -and Moses is just as thirsty as you are. He has no idea how God is going to get you all out of this, and he is getting very frightened about what you are all going to do to him if something doesn't happen pretty quickly. In desperation he puts the problem to God – and God tells him to find a particular rock and hit it. So he does – and out comes a torrent of water!

If you live in or near a desert you think a lot about water, where to find it and what to do if it isn't where you expect it. After all, a reliable supply of water can be the difference between life and death. The wandering tribes in the near East had names for different types of water. The stagnant, brackish, smelly sort they called 'bitter water' – it wasn't fit for people and even animals would often refuse to drink it. Pools of still water that was drinkable were called 'sweet water', but the best sort was the flowing, bubbling, clear water that they called 'living water'.

So when Jesus, who has been walking since early morning, sits down by Jacob's well in the heat of the day he is hot, tired and thirsty. A woman comes to the well. This is unusual – normally women would fetch water each morning and evening, and it was something of a social occasion – but this woman is a social outcast because of her dubious morals, all those husbands and now she's not even married – so she has to come by herself. Jesus asks her for a drink. She is surprised, and is even more surprised when he says he can give her living water. She thinks he means rushing, flowing water, a lively torrent that would be much better than the water in Jacob's well,

even though that is sweet. To her an endless supply of fresh, clear water would be a miracle, simply because it would save her having to come to the well on her own in the heat every day. She thinks of physical thirst and physical water-carrying. But Jesus is talking about spiritual thirst – the search for God.

He tests her by asking for her husband, and she answers honestly, although she could easily have lied. And because she is honest, and because what she then says shows that she is genuinely seeking God and waiting for the Messiah, he tells her who he is. She is one of the first people to whom he says: 'I am the Messiah'. She is a woman and a Samaritan, very much not one of 'God's chosen people'. She can't have been expecting to meet the Messiah at the well when she was doing her usual daily chores. She hadn't had a proper religious education. She wasn't a righteous person. But despite, or possibly because of, the difficulties she had experienced in her life, she is a true believer, hoping for the promised revelation. She is courageous enough to talk to him, honest enough about her problems and open-minded enough to see what is before her and accept what she is offered. She receives the spring of living water which will quench her spiritual thirst and lead her to eternal life.

Jesus will do the same for us, however unexpectedly we meet him, if we too can be honest and open about our difficulties and our need to find the truth. As we continue through Lent, may it be our prayer to encounter and recognise Jesus in our lives, and to drink in the life and truth that he offers.