

The poet Philip Larkin began one of his poems like this: "If I were called in/ To construct a religion/ I should make use of water." He goes on to talk about ritual fordings and drenchings and watery "any angled-light congregating endlessly". It is a good poem, but it makes me wonder about Larkin's familiarity with his own birth religion, for if we have ever journeyed through John's Gospel we will have seen that water is already well- represented in Christianity.

To recap lightly, we have the report of Jesus's baptism in the waters of the Jordan in John chapter 1. Jesus first miracle turning water into wine at the wedding at Cana in chapter 2. In chapter 3 last week we heard Jesus in conversation with the Pharisee Nicodemus, when Jesus explains that we must be reborn in water and in spirit – by baptism and by relationship with God.

Both Jesus, and John as he describes these events, make much use of water. On each occasion it is both real water and figurative water that is spoken of, and human confusion over the difference is a key part of the message.

The host at the wedding at Cana imagines that the best wine has been kept till last, almost as much of a miracle as what Jesus actually does in taking the water kept for Jewish ritual purification and transforming into the richness and strength of the wine of new covenant and life that Jesus brings.

Poor Nicodemus struggles with Jesus's message of being born again and for all his learning, asks clumsy literal questions about how a man can in fact be born again –can a grown man re-enter his mother's womb?

And now in chapter 4 comes the climax of the water references. Jesus as the Living Water – the water of life. And again we see the same pattern. Jesus is speaking figuratively and his hearer, the Samaritan woman is initially confused and literal in her response.

Let us look at this today. What makes Jesus weary from his journey sit by this well on the outskirts of a Samaritan town? What makes him scandalously ask a Samaritan woman for a drink of water? Scandalously, because of the age old bad blood between the Jewish people and the people of Samaria they despise for having forsaken the true law of God. Scandalously, because not only is she a Samaritan but a woman. No Jewish man in 1st century Palestine should speak to a woman for fear of defilement. So why does Jesus? Well, clearly, as we find out because he has a message for her, but firstly because he is quite simply and straightforwardly thirsty.

It is extraordinary the things we will do when we are in need, desperate. The most reticent of us will run into the street to find the help of a stranger in an emergency. It is not wrong to read into the beginning of this extraordinary encounter that Jesus means precisely what he says. He is thirsty, and the woman has a bucket to reach deep into the well.

But there the conversation changes and it becomes clear that Jesus and the woman are speaking at cross-purposes. For when the woman is talking about water she stays with that simple human level. Yes, she would like fresh flowing water rather than the pooling water at the bottom of this deep well. Yes, she would like water that lasts forever rather than having to slog out in the heat of the day each day.

But when Jesus talks about living water, that those who drink will never be thirsty again, he is talking about himself, and slowly this dawns upon the woman. The picture is a striking one. Two figures in a dusty landscape by an ancient well –caught in time. Jesus tells her everything she ever did, everything that brings her here alone an outcast, far from the communal village well - every fall, every husband,

every hope, every need. Yes, the desperation of the human need for meaning, for peace, for love, for the things that last beyond a lifetime and touch eternity.

Another poet writes about this. The one who wrote Psalm 42. He begins his poem like this: As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, O God./My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.

Physical thirst is more than matched and echoed by this spiritual thirst. From being the sought the woman becomes the seeker. She stands for us in this encounter. Going about our business on the surface of life, taking things literally when we take them at all, we find ourselves named and known and offered more than we knew we were seeking.

This Lent that offer is made to us afresh. The woman Jesus met left behind her water pot to tell everyone what had been offered to her. I wonder if we will do the same, or to slightly change the metaphor, whether we will just let it wash over us. We might, but if we do we will turn aside still thirsty.

Two more writers. The first is the poet Robert Browning, who struggled with his faith and would have liked to have lived without it, but knew in the end he could not. In this poem he is talking about someone who thinks he is safe from all that need and hope and thirst. Safe from Jesus dangerous offer of life-giving, life-meaning, life-changing grace. But then, Browning writes:

Just when we're safest, there's a sunset touch,
A fancy from a flower bell, someone's death...
And that's enough for fifty hopes and fears
As old and new at once as Nature's self
To rap and knock and enter in our soul.

Fifty hopes and fears. Browning is echoing another much earlier writer and theologian, St Augustine of Hippo, himself no stranger to wrestling with his faith. Augustine stated the situation in simpler and starker terms. We will ride the roller-coaster of hopes and fears, thirst and dissatisfaction until we recognise: God made us for himself and our hearts are restless till they find their rest in him.

No encounter with Jesus is accidental. Not for the Samaritan women, not for us this morning. We might find ourselves at this well this Lent. We might approach thinking we know what we need, impatient to get on with it, burdened by immediate concerns, and goodness knows we have more than enough of those this week. Jesus is calling us to go deeper, to know him better, to put down those burdens and truly trust and follow him.

Wherever we are in our Christian journey in our heads and hearts this morning I pray that we will let that water of our lives become the wine of his life in us. The dry places in our lives become springs of living water. And more that like that Samaritan woman over 2000 years ago our cups will so overflow with his love that we will leave the well not just changed but with a story to tell quench the thirst of everyone we meet. **Amen**