

‘Thirsting for life’

Reflection: March 12, 2023 Rev. Ian Brown
Exodus 17: 1 – 7, Psalm 95, John 4: 5 - 42

You hear it everywhere. People are nervous and worried. “How will we get through this situation?” There’s concern about survival and shortages and there’s a lot of grumbling. Moses is under a lot of stress. We don’t know what their interest rates were, but they were about to die of thirst.

The woman joins John’s story, coming to the well with a bucket. Jesus comes without. But he does the supplying. The Israelites come to Massah thirsty, having had a diet of dry manna crackers. Moses has only his stick. But he does the supplying, with some help.

These are ancient reflections, about our needs and how they’re met. It’s about unchanging and profound realities. Exodus is great story in itself, but I’m going to use some of it’s themes as an introduction to the gospel story from John.

The Israelites are on a journey. They’re on the way from slavery to freedom, from Egypt to the land of promise, but like all journeys there are moments of fun and pleasure and moments of frustration and downright terror. Our trip through Lent this year offers us time to reflect on these.

The story finds the Israelite escapees now entering the wilderness and there is no water. This is disaster in the dessert. We know what happens to fools who go off wandering in the desert unprepared. The people blame their leader – it seems to be a universal trait. "Why did you bring us out of Egypt to kill us, our children, and our livestock with thirst?" they complain.

Moses is in a terrible spot. Their travel insurance policy has not covered thirst in the wilderness. They have hopped out of the frying pan of slavery right into the fire of the desert; at least there was water in Egypt! A desperate Moses "cries out to God". And, as with all the events of this exodus, God somehow supplies the need.

The woman at the well is not after a chat; there is a

need here but in fact water doesn’t appear in the story. Water becomes a sign that helps the woman and her neighbors.

It’s obvious that this gospel writer loved a good long story. Today’s is the longest ‘one to one’ discussion in the gospels. It’s full of images and humour and ordinary human relating. Remember it’s an ancient story, set in ancient culture. There is much strangeness to modern eyes. Getting water at a well is not what we do, there are prophets, worship on mountains verses temples, predictions of the messiah, - but having had five husbands might not seem so unusual now!

This conversation with a foreign woman is a sharp contrast to the story it follows. Chapter 3 is Jesus chat with a Jewish man; Nicodemus, an educated teacher of religion, who doesn’t seem to get it. But the foreign woman at the well is said to be the first evangelist, sharing her faith with her townsfolk. There’s a contrast!

Picture the scene: It’s noon - quiet time at a well outside town, strangers aren’t so welcome. It’s not Jesus country. Water fetching is woman’s work and they come in the cool of the early morning, but one particular woman is there, expecting to be by herself.

Surprise is the context. Neither Jesus, nor this woman should be there. Jesus is off the beaten track for a Jewish man. He’s taking a short cut through Samaritan territory. To Jews, they were religious outcasts. It’s a long journey on foot, from Judea to Galilee.

Jesus must be tired - the disciples have gone on ahead to get food from town, while Jesus rests.

He, a Jewish traveler, alone, she a woman “with a past”, keeping a low profile. But in an ordinary setting, doing mundane work, the woman is met by a man she doesn’t know. She is open enough to engage with him and in this meeting she encounters much more than a thirsty man, she finds surprising insight and deep truth.

Isn’t it interesting to see that Jesus just accepts the woman as she is? We learn she has had five husbands, we don’t know if they all died or what.

He tells us that her present relationship is non-marital - and Jesus accepts this too - she is not judged. Jesus engages her with acceptance and an offer of something more.

The woman is astute. She knows the value of a bucket. When she says, "You have no bucket and the well is deep," she is making an accurate assessment of the situation. She is saying, in effect, "The task is big and you don't have the means to accomplish it."

I hear her voice often when I am standing next to a deep well with no bucket, when I am facing a situation that exceeds my human abilities alone to address. We all face an unknown needs – the well is deep, what bucket do we have? People in terrible need take awful risks to leave home looking for help. The well is deep, what bucket do we have together? Someone in the family is dying and there is a deep well of need there - what bucket is available?

Between them standing there, Jesus and the Samaritan, there was a bucket, even if the 'thing' was no longer important. Perhaps there's a bucket to meet the thirst around us, that's handy as well? From ordinary well, to the mystical source of abundant life, Jesus moves the conversation. The symbol of the bucket is no longer in the frame. He takes her from rope and bucket - to the depths of the soul and God's desire to quench the deepest longing of the human spirit. Living water, that which gives abundant, eternal life.

Maybe the bucket is a good metaphor for scripture. It's a tool we can return to again and again, and use it to help find fresh, life giving resources that are always new. Maybe the bucket is a good metaphor for the church. A place where conversation can happen, where we can be surprised by a new depth of understanding – where we hear Jesus offer us living water. A place where we find more reflection in the water than we ever expected. This is what we, the church are called to offer too; offer to a world in need of Jesus unqualified acceptance and free gift of living water, of spirit, of abundant life.

In conversation, Jesus takes an ordinary matter, and draws out deeper needs and hungers. This doesn't happen with every conversation he has, but this shows the openness that makes it possible. The woman responds – we aren't sure exactly what she understands. Her words seem an exaggeration, 'come see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah can he?' Perhaps she isn't sure what it all means either! But she does tell the people of her town and they come out to meet Jesus too. This is one of the things I love about the story most. The Samaritan woman has no preaching expertise. She has no certificate course in evangelism and that is OK!

The important thing is in sharing a contact with Jesus. She just does what she can, with some enthusiasm and it's enough. The key issue is the sharing of the water of life.

In all the pictures of this story there is a closeness shown between Jesus and the Samaritan women. For that, Jesus had to cross barriers of custom, race and sexism. He was prepared to risk his good name and reputation to be close enough to one who was prepared to listen and engage with interest. Jesus was able to offer God's grace in a way that made some sense to her.

The imagery of this scene is all about relationship. Jesus and a woman. God embodied and person in need. The wellspring of life and hope and healing with the thirsty of this world. And then it goes on to be about the sharing of the find.

I wonder what living water have we found that others could find enticing? Is there a word of hope, some healing and love to be shared – I hope there is. Are there still some that would be interested to find out for themselves, to find acceptance, meaning, a wellspring of abundant life.

There are many buckets of need. May we be deep drinkers at the spring of Jesus living water and sharers just as much. As we stand at our deep well, worried, with no bucket, remember the words Jesus uttered at the beginning: "If you knew who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him, and he would give you living water" Amen.