

Living Water

26 February 2023

Exodus 17.1-7

First Sunday in Lent

Romans 5.1-11

Rev. Alan Keeler

John 4.8-30

Thirsty

Water is a wonderful source of life for us. In the baptism service there is the prayer over the water that begins:

'we thank you, almighty God, for the gift of water to sustain, refresh and cleanse all life.'

There is something about a Summer's day when we are hot and sticky from having done the gardening, we can come and find a cool drink and a wash and find ourselves transformed.

The meaning of baptism can have many deep aspects. But we're invited to take hold of it beginning simply with how ordinary and wonderful water is.

In our reading from John's Gospel Jesus has arrived in a Samaritan village. He is hot and thirsty from his travels and water is going to be part of the answer.

The Samaritan village

We're probably well aware what a Samaritan village would mean to a Jewish person of Jesus' time. Many years ago their nation had been deliberately corrupted by the Assyrian people after their invasion. The Jewish faith of Northern Israel was mixed with other gods and practises. Because of this the Jews of Jesus time shunned them.

Jesus meets a Samaritan woman. As the discussion goes on we find that her domestic life has been chaotic with many previous partners. Jesus disciples arrive on the scene and they were shocked to find him talking alone with a woman which was socially unacceptable.

In writing this scene John gives us a range of unsettling experiences. Desperate thirst, unacceptable foreigners, an unsatisfactory personal life and a broken taboo of talking with a woman alone.

It might be such a description is puzzling to our modern ears. But in reality we are in the midst of a discussion about how we treat foreigners with people crossing the English Channel and a television pundit being criticised for speaking out about it. In terms of relationships we know the pain where our personal life has had great

disappointments and losses. There have been great strides made about the position of women in our society. But as much as there are many ways not least legal to express the equality; achieving the reality still has some way to go.

Worship

The conversation between Jesus and the Samaritan woman begins with him asking for water. He then says he can produce a better water which is living water. This rather puzzles the woman as Jesus has no bucket. Jesus then asks her to bring her husband so that her family can share in the goodness that he is offering. She reveals she doesn't have a husband and Jesus says he knows about her background and her many previous partners.

At this point the woman begins to talk about worship. She says Jesus is a prophet and she wants to know where the right place to offer sacrifices should be. Should it be on the Samaritan mountain or in Jerusalem.

This may seem a very strange turn in the direction of conversation. But as I said earlier we are in a situation with a range of unsettling experiences. Worship is about how you make things right. It is about valuing what is really worthy and getting your relationship with God sound. Which is what Jesus means when he says

'true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth'

The danger with worship is that we will concentrate on established practises and be concerned to get a performance right. If our view of worship is not big enough the God we worship will seem too distant or too small. If the realities of our lives, particularly the troubles we experience are not addressed we will not be nourished by how we worship.

Sin

I think it is reasonable to describe what I have said as 'unsettling experiences' as sin. Writing in Romans Saint Paul says:

'all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God' Romans 3.23

The true measure of sin is about how far it is from God's good purposes. We might try to tidy this up by thinking about actions that break rules. But this might on the one hand let us off because we can't see a rule that's been broken. But on the other

hand we cannot see how God can resolve things because we have too legal view of life.

There is a way in which Saint Paul, very much following on from Jesus. Paul deepens how we are part of the brokenness of life. But to see this is a great mercy because we are freed from having to sort it out ourselves. With God's actions we are forgiven of our wrong actions and are made precious children of God.

Christ before us

The reading we had from the book of Romans today has one of the most wonderful passages I know of in the Bible.

'For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die. But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.' Romans 5.6-8

This is about God's passion to help us and his action to save us.

When would we seek to help someone? Probably when we realise there is now no option and they cannot help themselves any longer.

Who would we seek to help? Probably someone whom we felt deserves our actions.

Why would we seek to help someone? No doubt because they would feel grateful and appreciate all we have done and help us in the future.

There is something reasonable about all of that. We imagine that sort of reasonableness is how God is going to behave towards us.

But Paul says when we are weak. When we are ungodly. When we are in sin. God has already reached out to forgive us and save us. God comes to meet the unsettling experiences of our lives to sustain, refresh and cleanse our lives. The experiences might be confusion and anxiety. They might be finding ourselves in something very wrong taking place. There might be deliberate harm and destruction that we have done. There is nothing too small, there is nothing too great. At the right time Christ died for us. That is how God saves, that is how God saves you and me.

The wrath of God

All of this may sound very encouraging. It is seeking to embrace the messiness of the world, the unruliness of our lives and explain how God is

more wonderful than we had realised. But within that reading from Romans Paul speaks about the wrath of God. This phrase may sound unsettling to our modern ears not least because we have just been looking at the great love and salvation that God offers.

Wrath sounds like anger that has lost its temper and is lashing out. It looks like the rather arbitrary action of someone who cannot be trusted and will be cruel and spiteful.

This may have been our experience of wrath. There may have been a bully whom we had known, or a school teacher who had lost their patience or even sadly a parent who struggled with their responsibilities. It may even be there are scenes in the Bible that bring us fear.

But it must be said not all situations in life ought to be addressed with just a cool understanding. Indeed to be upset, passionate and fiercely determined may well be what's required. None of these implies a loss of temper. None of this implies an arbitrary lashing out.

Dare I say it that true love requires an engagement of both heart and mind. True love will not remain quiet in the face of the goodness of life being ignored, spoilt or destroyed. There is a good sense of anger to be expressed.

Jesus passion

We speak of Jesus passion and at its most clear it is Christ dying for us on the cross. But in his ministry he was prepared to be provocative, controversial and passionate to enable people to find lives that flourish.

With the Samaritan woman he does not belittle her for her religious confusion but leads her to understand true worship. When it is evident her domestic life has been chaotic Jesus is not moralistic but acknowledges what the truth is. This must have been with some sensitivity because the woman continues to be drawn to Jesus and goes to tell her village of how wonderful he is.

The woman's assessment of Jesus is summed up with her final question

'He cannot be the Messiah, can he?' John 4.29end

This resonates with our reflections about the transfiguration a couple of weeks ago. The gospel of John does not have a transfiguration narrative nor a discussion at Caesarea Philippi about who

he is. It is as if John has given this revealing of Christ's glory and his title of Messiah to a Samaritan woman.

Living water

So the final question is are we thirsty? Do we have unsettling experiences, Do we sin? Have our lives fallen short in ways either small or great. If so, Christ has gone before us with passion so that we might know the salvation and love of God.

Drink his living water and be satisfied.