

St Hilda's Sermon – 19th March 2017 – The Living Water

Water has been in the news a lot lately. Floods and lack of clean water in Auckland as the treatment station struggles with silt, rivers that are running dry and the need to rescue eels and fish, or companies seeking to bottle fresh, clean water and send it overseas. This week's gospel is also about water.

We're on a journey. We began last week in Jerusalem, the place of the Temple where God was believed to reside on earth in the holy of holies, where once a year the high priest could very carefully enter and we're heading toward Galilee.

Last week we saw Nicodemus, a Pharisee, a member of the Sanhedrin, coming to see Jesus at night, when it's quiet. This week we have a woman (we don't have a name for her) who comes to see Jesus at midday. They both get to talk to Jesus alone, without the crowds of people.

In between, Jesus and his disciples have been baptising people in the Jordan, the river that runs the length of the country. Jesus has more and more followers and John the Baptist disciples are concerned about this rival to their master. John describes himself as the friend of the bridegroom who has been sent ahead to make the preparations, but now that the bridegroom, Jesus, has come, his role decreases.

The Pharisees had heard that Jesus and his disciples were baptizing more people than John and Jesus decides to travel north up to Galilee, his home.

The most direct route is to travel through Samaria up the western side of the Jordan River but most Jews, and certainly a good rabbi, would cross the Jordan and take the longer route up the eastern side to avoid Samaria.

Jesus chooses the direct route. Why? We don't know. Perhaps he is tired, he is certainly resting by the well of Jacob while his disciples go off to buy food, or perhaps he wants a bit of time with fewer crowds about him.

The woman appears, around midday to draw water from the well. Most women would draw water in the cool of the evening and we can only speculate why. Possibly it is because she is an outcaste because of her history and other women want nothing to do with her.

The well is the well of Jacob that was given to his son Joseph and is still there. It was reckoned to be over 100ft (30.5m) deep about the time of Jesus and in 1935 it cleaned out and was measured as being 138ft (42m). It was not a spring; water percolated into it at the bottom and a long rope and a bucket was necessary to get the water. Travellers would always carry a rope and bucket to draw water but possibly the disciples had that with them as they went to buy food.

So the conversation begins which is unusual in itself. A good Jewish rabbi would not speak to a woman in public, not even his daughter or his wife. The Pharisees were known to have bruises and grazes on their faces because they, in their efforts to avoid looking at a woman lustfully would close their eyes and thus the injuries. The disciples, when they return, are surprised to find Jesus speaking to a woman.

A good Jew would not drink from anything that a Samaritan had touched as it would be unclean.

A good Jew of course wouldn't have been there in the first place. No wonder the woman reacts with surprise!

The conversation follows the pattern that we had with Nicodemus where Jesus answers his questions with obscure statements that are misinterpreted and as Nicodemus tried to clarify the answers there are even more obscure answers. The obvious literal interpretations make no sense.

Here the discussion is about water. The woman is concentrating on the water in the well. It is still water and as such probably had some insects such as mosquitoes in it and maybe a bit of slime. Jesus is speaking of water that is living. It is like the water in a fast-flowing stream which is much cleaner and fresher and preferable – or is he?

A couple of weeks ago I preached on the forty days Jesus spent in the desert after his baptism. There he met with Satan, the enemy, who tested him with physical temptations: food for his hunger, spectacular demonstrations of daring that will convince everyone who sees them, and power over the countries of the world. These temptations all involve things that we can see and touch. Jesus responds with words of scripture that refer to God. "One does not live by bread alone, but every word that comes from the mouth of God, Do not put the Lord your God to the test, Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him."

If we look at Jesus response here, he is again referring to the spiritual realm not the earthly. The living water he is referring to is the gift of God; "a spring of water gushing up to eternal life".

There is nothing easy for the woman in this puzzling conversation. She has to work to get answers and struggle to make them out. She may not be as well educated in the Jewish Law as Nicodemus but she certainly produces a good argument. She knows her peoples history and beliefs. Samaritans accept only the first five books of the Old Testament (the Pentateuch) and there had been many battles between Jews and Samaritans whom the Jews regarded as being a mongrel race of mixed ancestry unlike them whose descent was purely from the twelve tribes. They disagreed about where to worship and how to worship God.

She points this out when Jesus starts to make some very accurate comments about her life and the number of husbands and men she has lived with. Possibly she felt he seemed to know a bit much about her, maybe she needs time to think about who this person is. At the end she pulls out the trump card, speaking about the Messiah who is coming and will explain everything. Jesus replies "I am he, the one who is speaking to you." Jesus freely admits this to this woman, a thing that he avoids saying to anyone else. Possibly it doesn't have the political dimension here that it would in Judea.

The disciples return and they have a similar conversation with Jesus as to food. They are concentrating on the food that they have bought, Jesus on the food that is important, to the will of the one who sent him. He quotes a proverb about the harvest that implies that patience is needed after the planting of the seed until the crop is ready. Sychar the town nearby is on a plain and is known for its abundant crops unlike most of the land along the river. He may well be looking at a crop in the ground around them.

He tells them that the time is right for harvest. As anyone who gardens knows that there is a time when the crop is ready and if left it can be ruined by rain or start to deteriorate if left in the field. Courgettes rapidly turn to marrows.

The woman leaves and tells the people of the town what has happened to her and they come to see. Jesus and the disciples stay another two days and the townspeople too become convinced, not by her testimony but by what they have seen and heard.

The journey is from the south, where there is Jerusalem and the Temple, the centre of power and prestige to the North, to Galilee that is the outback, the suspicious place where people mix far too much with others who are unclean.

It is also a journey along a river, the Jordan from the Dead Sea in the south, near Jerusalem, where nothing can live, up through Samaria with a stop today at a well, which produces water clean enough for use, and up further to Lake Galilee which is known for its abundance of life and fish.

Jesus is engaging with those he meets challenging them to look beyond the earthly, obvious things to the spiritual reality. There is urgency also. The time is right, people are in the right attitude to listen and to hear the message that he brings, whether they are Jews of the highest position or a woman from a despised race.

He doesn't stand on a street corner and demand that they obey his commands. He draws them deeper and deeper, aware of their weaknesses. They may decide that it is getting too dangerous, too personal, too much into areas of their lives where they don't want to go. But for those who chose to travel on that journey with him there is the promise of life in the light rather than that of hiding on the dark in case someone was to find out who they really were.

He is the source of living water that flows through and washes away the slime and insects, that is fresh and good to drink, that isn't salty and that is the promise of eternal life in right relationship with God himself.

In our first Lenten study we were asked to think about how life might change if Jesus was to move into the neighbourhood. These readings give us a glimpse.

Jesus no longer walks on earth as a human but his Spirit moves with us who follow him. As we walk and listen to him we may begin to see the crops that are ready for harvest, the person to whom we speak who may be ready to ask further, to want to know more. We too can be those who share out the fresh clean living water.

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