

Readings: Exodus 17: 1-7 and John 4: 5-42

Thirsty for God

Many years ago, in the days before we had children, we went on holiday with friends to a villa on the Costa Blanca in Spain. The villa was owned by our friends' parents and was beautiful. Unfortunately, it lacked one thing - water! When we arrived, we were told that the area was going through a drought and all the water had been bought up by the farmers inland, and by businessmen, and it was obvious who one of them was!

Our villa overlooked and was at the edge of a beautifully maintained golf course and they had plenty of water. Whilst we were driving to the nearest store to buy these enormous plastic bottles of water, the sprinklers on the golf course were going continuously. And it was so hot – it was August - my friend was a teacher so we had to go in August at the height of summer, and one day we couldn't resist it any more – we climbed down the bank and ran under the cooling sprinklers – it was amazing! We thought we were in trouble with the greenkeeper when he saw us and came running over, but instead he joined in the fun and sprayed us with his hosepipe! That fortnight reminded me of just how important water is for life and just how much we take it for granted.

But not so in biblical times. Water literally meant life or death, which is why there are so many references to water occurring in both the Old and New Testaments. Perhaps that's why the Israelites in our reading from Exodus today were so quarrelsome – here they were in the heat of the desert with no water and they were thirsty!

And as well as water being the difference between life and death, we also know that in the Bible, water has spiritual significance.

A few years ago, a group of us were on holiday crossing over from Jordan into Israel and alongside us going through customs were hundreds of Muslim men returning from their pilgrimage to Mecca – and they were kicking these heavy plastic bottles of Holy Water through customs.

These bottles were full, and far too heavy for anyone to carry, but were clearly very important to the pilgrims. And of course, water is said to have healing powers – at the Roman Baths a few miles away, and people today people visit places like Lourdes to bathe in the healing waters. And of course, we remember the importance of water used in baptism – that symbol of new spiritual life.

Water, as spiritual thirsting for God is a theme that appears again and again in the Bible.

And here we have in our Gospel reading the story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well. This is such a familiar story that our familiarity with it can blind us to its original shock value.

At that time, in that context Jesus openly challenges and breaks social boundaries. Firstly, the boundary between the chosen people, the Jews and the rejected Samaritans, the outsiders, and the second boundary between male and female. No wonder the disciples were so shocked to see Jesus talking to a Samaritan woman when they returned.

And the woman herself is taken aback to be spoken to by a Jewish man. 'How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?' she asks him.

And of course, we ask, what does Jesus mean by all this? Well, in the same way Jesus approaches this woman, he challenges each one of us. We naturally assess others when we meet them, at its very basic it's part of our human survival instinct to assess others – are they going to be friendly or are they hostile? And of course, we assess others on whatever grounds influence us – we

assess on race, on gender, on age, religion, sexual orientation – are they like us, or different from us....

And Jesus is inviting us as people claiming to be his disciples, to join him in breaking through these barriers that exclude others.

Let's for a moment explore what we know about this woman. She's out in the midday sun, alone. Nicodemus last week chose to come to Jesus by night. This week, the woman meets Jesus by chance, in the light. Why is she here at noon? This is siesta time. Is she disorganized? Is she disorientated or is she here at this time so as not to meet anyone?

When Jesus asks what brings her out in the heat of the day and she answers 'thirst', he sees beyond her answer and saw she had a thirst she couldn't quench.

Jesus was aware that she had had five husbands and was living with another man. She was clearly seeking something, clearly searching for something. What was she thirsting for? Was it love? Or acceptance? Was it that feeling of emptiness inside? Jesus recognized that thirst she couldn't quench and as the Messiah standing next to her, he offers her Living Water, spiritual sustenance that will quench her thirst.

The woman's immediate response is to think – great, I'll never have to do this boring job of collecting water every day again, but of course Jesus is offering more, much more. He offers the woman, and also us, the deep things we really want or need. He beckons her and us beyond those surface things he knows we want or need, to something deeper. He beckons us to that fountain of living water that alone can sustain us on our spiritual journey for eternity.

And next the woman becomes an apostle. When the disciples come back, she returns to her village Sychar and

tells everyone about this amazing Messiah she's met and they in turn come to believe.

I wonder if we recognize our deepest need for the living water that only God can bring? Do we still thirst for God, or do we perhaps try to put him to the test as did the Israelites following Moses in the desert?

Do we thirst for God in the way the deer pants for water as we just sang? Do we really acknowledge how our lives too depend on God and are sustained by him or do we put more faith in our ability to control our own lives? Is God our main desire or do we settle for superficiality – hiding from deeper questions by the comfort of perceived success?

Are we attracted by, and so busy following those false Gods of status, possessions, fame, power? Are we so attracted by them that we lose sight of that hunger or thirst within, that cry from the depths of our soul for God – that thirst so powerfully described in psalm 42 on which the song we just sang was based.

I remember when I was on an Alpha course – just how thirsty I was for more knowledge, more of Jesus in my life (as the song goes) and his name was like a powerful magnet.

It was like there was some sort of antennae on me that was programmed to hear his name mentioned and every time I did, whether it was on the radio, television, in conversation or whatever, I was there, tuned in, immediately attentive – thirsty to hear what was said, what more I could learn, and part of the challenge of our Christian faith, especially during Lent is to maintain that thirst – that thirst for God in our lives.

The woman at the well was thirsty for something. For more in her life.

What's life like for you and me now?

We live in uncertain times don't we – times of fear and despair for some. As Coronavirus takes a hold, stock markets crash, countries such as Italy experience lock down, businesses start to fail and flights are cancelled, the penny is dropping, that many of us, and those around us, are going to be dramatically affected. We used to feel we had control over our lives but less so now. We used to watch the news daily. Now it changes by the hour.

Perhaps we're worried about our family, friends who aren't well. Are we feeling worried, are we feeling anxious? If we're feeling low, it can be a challenge to still thirst for God.

It may be that you are fine, but you don't need to look far to see others struggling....are they thirsting for God? Do they even know God is there?

I heard about someone the other day who has been running his own business, very successfully for 30 years and within three months last year, it was gone. Finished, closed down. But it wasn't just the loss of his business that was hurting, his business was part of the meaning of his life - this was where he went every day, where his colleagues were, where his social life was, this was where he had a place to be, status and work to do and it was gone – and so quickly – and he is left confused, bewildered, living a life now of quiet despair. And others in our current economic situation may be feeling the same.

Like our Samaritan woman at the well, this man too needs to happen upon the Messiah and experience that living water that can bring hope.

Our message from our gospel reading today is very good news. We could say the woman at the well was self-isolating.... We tend to think of self- isolation in negative terms, but once we start thinking about it, it can be very positive. We have an opportunity to serve our communities in different ways. Pray for people, shop for them, keep in touch with them so they don't feel lonely.

Also, I don't know if you listened to radio 4 yesterday morning. They were interviewing a woman who was trapped in a tent in the Antarctic for weeks on end, due to extremely bad weather. She turned this isolation into a positive thing and gave us some advice.

She said, if you're forced to not go out, read those really thick books that you'd love to read but never have the time to concentrate on, really sit and listen to music rather than just having it on in the background, listen to different radio programmes, watch documentaries.

And this is Lent, why not use more time in reading the Bible, or a book on reflections for Lent. Why not spend time praying for family and friends and neighbours, praying for the people in Italy, and those in Africa who don't have a decent health service. Why not use the time as an opportunity to come closer to God?

So, let me end by recapping. A woman goes to fetch water, and finds Jesus waiting at the well. Perhaps she longs for a more satisfying life. Maybe she longs for freedom from the shame that made her go to the well when she expected no one else to be there. And she finds that Jesus treats her with respect and dignity. And he attends to her spiritual thirst.

And he does the same for us too. Jesus offers us living water – water that brings us blessing and refreshment right to the very core of our being.

Amen