

A chance encounter with Jesus

12 February 2023

INTRODUCING TODAY'S THEME

- Water– what do we use it for, where do we get it?
- How would you like to have to fetch and carry it from the end of the street every day? Or perhaps from a few kilometres away?
- When we drink we get thirsty again. But one day Jesus talked about a type of water that he could give us that would satisfy our thirst for always. He called it **living** water – I wonder what that means?
- Today we're going to be thinking about **living water** and how it's related to knowing Jesus and knowing God – and how it's needed for life just as much as physical water.

BIBLE READINGS

Exodus 17:1-6

The whole Israelite community set out from the Desert of Sin, travelling from place to place as the Lord commanded. They camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink. So they quarrelled with Moses and said, 'Give us water to drink.'

Moses replied, 'Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you put the Lord to the test?'

But the people were thirsty for water there, and they grumbled against Moses. They said, 'Why did you bring us up out of Egypt to make us and our children and livestock die of thirst?'

Then Moses cried out to the Lord, 'What am I to do with these people? They are almost ready to stone me.'

The Lord answered Moses, 'Go out in front of the people. Take with you some of the elders of Israel and take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. I will stand there before you by the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it for the people to drink.' So Moses did this in the sight of the elders of Israel.

John 4:5-42 (dramatic reading)

MESSAGE

Water is Essential to Life on Earth

It is the **ONLY** substance on Earth that can be found naturally-occurring in all states of matter...

It makes up **60%** of your body, **70%** of your brain, and **80%** of your blood...

It covers more than **70%** of the planet, but less than **3%** of it is drinkable...

Water, as we all know, is essential for life ... whether for plants, animals, birds or humans. Just a few days without water and we will die.



In our first reading from Exodus this was exactly the problem facing the people as they wandered through the desert. Why did you bring us out here, Moses, just to die of thirst?

In the story, God acts through Moses and water is provided.



In our dramatic story from John's Gospel, Jesus is hot and tired and he too is looking for something to drink. There's no stream nearby but there is a well, a famous one known as Jacob's well. When a woman comes along, we may think of other chance meetings in Scripture that also took

place at wells. Here the conversation doesn't lead to marriage but rather turns naturally to **thirst** and **water**. It takes a surprising turn when Jesus mentions **living water**.

The story of the woman at the well is intriguing at a number of levels – not least of which is that she has **more speaking lines** than any other woman in the NT yet we don't even know her name.

She is portrayed as **vulnerable** and **isolated** ... for why else would she be coming to the well – alone – at the hottest time of the day? She's



apparently endured several unhappy relationships with men but more than holds her own with Jesus. She is probably a social outcast yet is shown to be spiritually hungry and thirsty, searching for more in her life.

The distance between Jesus and the woman is highlighted from her opening words when she asks why a Jewish man such as Jesus would be asking her – **a woman of Samaria** – for a drink. In that culture, men did not talk alone with women – and Jews did not readily talk to Samaritans.

A word of background ... after the time of King Solomon, the nation of Israel split into two distinct kingdoms – Judah in the south, centred on Jerusalem, and Israel in the north, centred on Samaria, where a rival temple to the one in Jerusalem was established.



The two kingdoms lived uneasily side by side until the Assyrians conquered Samaria in around 720 BCE, deported most of the people to Nineveh and replaced them with other displaced people from around the Assyrian empire. For Jewish people, Samaritans represented the embarrassing side of the family that we don't talk about or mix with, sort of half-breed Jews.



While drawing water from a well was usually regarded as women's work, Jesus reverses the role with a teasing question ... if you only knew the gift of God that I have to offer you and who it is that you're speaking with, you would ask **me** for a drink of **living** water.

And so the conversation is set up to explore these two issues – the gift of living water and the one offering the gift.

First about the **water**. The woman is curious, but thinking in **practical** terms ... sir, you have no bucket and the well is deep ... just how exactly do you intend to get me this drink of living water?



I'm talking about a different type of water, suggests Jesus. You're thinking of the only type of water you've ever known – the **H₂O type of water** – like in this well – water from the **earth** that can never fully quench your inner thirst – you drink it every

day but always end up thirsty again.

I'm talking about water from **above** – **heavenly** water – **living** water – that's like a spring inside of you that will fully satisfy your thirst and well up to eternal life.

So coming back to the story in Exodus, the two essential things needed for life in the desert were **food** and **drink**. God supplied both – through **manna** and **water from the rock**. John takes these two life-giving actions of God and suggests that **Jesus** is the one who provides both **life-giving food** – his very self – that is the focus of chapter 6 – and **life-giving water** – that is mentioned here and becomes a focus in chapter 7.

How much of all this the woman may have grasped we don't know. She seems keen to get hold of the living water, but mostly so that she doesn't have to keep coming back to the well every day. The sort of thirst that the living water will quench neither she nor the disciples yet understand.



Jesus then moves onto the second topic, **who** it is that's offering the living water. He begins by making some observations of the woman's private life ... how he knew these details we're not told.

Go call your husband.

I don't have a husband.

That's right, suggests Jesus, you've actually had several husbands and the person you're living with now is not your husband.

Okay, you've got me there, Mr **Prophet**. Time to change the subject to something less personal ... you Jews say we must worship God in Jerusalem but our people have worshipped on nearby Mt Gerazim for centuries. Let's see how you get around that curly one!



I suspect that Jesus is smiling by now – he's having an in-depth theological conversation with a remarkably astute woman.

All right. You want to talk about **worship**.

True worship of God is beyond **geography** – whether

Jerusalem or Samaria –

and beyond **form** – whether sacrifices, choice of songs, liturgy –
it's about truly seeking God, worshipping in **Spirit** and **truth**.

Jesus doesn't unpack what he means here, but along with the apostle Paul seems to imply that true worship will be inspired by God's own Spirit and will be based on the truth Jesus reveals about God as Father and Jesus as the Son.



You've got me again Mr Prophet. All these questions have complex answers. But when the **Messiah** comes, **he'll** explain everything to us.



I am he, the one speaking to you.

I am ... God's name ... in person ... I am ... speaking for God

...

... I am ...

At that point, the disciples return from town and are astonished to find Jesus talking with the Samaritan woman. She's heard enough to know that if Jesus is speaking the truth, she needs to share these profound insights with others. She leaves her water jar at the well – it no longer seems important – and goes off to find the other townsfolk – this social outcast but spiritually attuned and courageous woman.

Come and meet the person who knows everything about me!

She has found a new faith in Jesus – a simple and incomplete faith no doubt – but a faith ... inspired by the living water welling up within her. She wants to share it with others.

The people of the town listen to her testimony and are sufficiently intrigued to invite Jesus and the disciples to stay around for a few days so they can hear more. Many put their faith in Jesus, who they pronounce not as the Jewish Messiah but as the Saviour of the whole world.



One lesson from today's story is that we mustn't predict how a person might respond to the message of Jesus. There are spiritually thirsty people in the world who are sometimes hiding in plain sight, just waiting to have their curiosity aroused,

like the woman at the well.

Perhaps we can identify with the woman and her difficult journey of faith from rejection and hurt and isolation to curiosity, engagement, belief and witness? It appears that she longed for acceptance and belonging, and for meaning in her life, all of which she found in Jesus.

Are we kind on ourselves and kind to others in their search for more in life?

Third, how do we satisfy our own spiritual **hunger** and **thirst**?

Where is our '**well**', somewhere quiet, away from the noise and bustle of life, where we can sit for a while and listen to what Jesus might be saying to us?

Is it a favourite chair where we might sit and pray or a favourite place where we walk and talk with God along the way?

The invitation from Jesus is always to come to him and rest, to lay aside our burdens and be refreshed. When we are feeling stressed, or lonely, or weary, or thirsty – that's when we're especially invited to come and drink the living water.

But another aspect of this story is that the living water isn't just for our own enjoyment and refreshing. It's to be shared with others ... so like the woman we're encouraged to be bold and to point others towards Jesus.