

Jesus and a thirsty world

Exodus 17.1-7

John 4.5-42

The sermon this morning is in two halves.

We begin looking at the thirst of Jesus. We will then turn to look at the thirst of the woman.

It all begins with Jesus being thirsty ... and it's as simple as that.

Eastern Africa has been devastated by yet another drought ... and it's the women and children who are most badly affected.

And a simple request to a world, otherwise awash with water and with food and with resources ... Please give us some resources for food and water ...

Jesus, hungry and thirsty is at the well, reaching out his hand to ask for our help in the eyes of the sick and malnourished children.

A simple request ... a simple solution ... surely??

But of course, we have made life in this world so unnecessarily complicated, that it never is as simple as that.

The simple human request from Jesus ... one human being to another human being ... hits up against all sorts of social barriers that makes this transaction far from simple.

One person is thirsty ... he meets another person at a well ... the other person has a jar to draw water from the well ... how complicated can it be?

- He's a man and she's a woman ... and they are alone ... without company, without a chaperone ... they really should not be talking ... this breaks all the rules of social etiquette ...
The politics of gender get in the way. (And I am using politics with a small 'p')
- He's a Jew and she's a Samaritan ... sworn enemies. He should not dare to ask her ... she should not dare to help him ... This whole encounter just

should not take place. And the thought that Jesus would drink from the same vessel that the woman has drunk from ... well that would take things just too far!

The politics of ethnicity get in the way.

- He's a respectable religious leader and she's a person of questionable morality. He is risking shame and suspicion by talking alone with her. She is risking further gossip and public approbation from talking with him. The politics of morality get in the way.
- The politics of gender, the politics of ethnicity and the politics of morality all make this apparently simple encounter into a complex encounter.

And that's always how it is, isn't it? The things that should be so very simple, are made extraordinarily complicated because of all of the divisions and separations that we have built into the fabric of our lives.

We see it in the drought that is affecting people in East Africa.

The politics of gender is at play here.

How else do you describe the simple fact that it is the women and children who are suffering the most? You don't see large lines of men queuing up for help at the emergency centres. It is the women and their children. There is something here about gender politics with a small p that is having its impact on this disaster.

And then there is the politics of ethnicity.

In some parts of the region, the famine is exacerbated because of the civil wars and conflicts that are raging.

Not least in South Sudan. A United Nations report on Friday has blamed the government of South Sudan for the scale of the disaster in that country.

On the one hand the report claims that the government has continued to spend large sums of money on military expenditure while failing to respond to the humanitarian crisis.

"Despite the scale and scope of the political, humanitarian, and economic crises, the panel continues to uncover evidence of the ongoing procurement of weapons by the ... Government for the SPLA (South Sudanese army), the

National Security Service, and other associated forces and militias," the report said.

On the other hand the civil war has compounded the effects of the drought and famine:

"The bulk of evidence suggests that the famine ... has resulted from protracted conflict and, in particular, the cumulative toll of military operations ..; denial of humanitarian access ...; and population displacement resulting from the war," the report said.

This conflict is yet another conflict where a country is largely split along ethnic lines.

The politics of ethnicity with a capital 'p' and a lowercase 'p', play into this tragedy.

Someone is thirsty and in need of a drink ... and the politics of ethnicity are getting in the way.

And why has the international community not managed to get its act together so much sooner? Why does it take the mass movement of people in search of food, the queues of people in emergency centres, the trail of cholera and malnutrition to generate the compassion needed to respond to these basic human needs?

I think it can be argued that the politics of morality at one level or another come into play here.

Jesus shouldn't be in conversation with this woman at the well because of her morality. She has got herself into this situation and so Jesus should just avoid all contact with her. As if Jesus will, in some way become morally contaminated.

Now all sorts of moral questions can be raised to question whether or not money should be poured into these countries where vast numbers of people are facing starvation.

- If the countries have brought this on themselves by spending their money on arms rather than on relief, doesn't the pouring in of international aid simply reinforce the scandal of the situation?
- Suspicions that the governments of some of these countries are rife with corruption, and sending international aid will only validate and excuse the

corruption. On the Transparency International scale of corrupt nations, the nations caught up in this present famine

- Ethiopia 108/176
- Kenya 145/176
- South Sudan 175/176
- Somalia 176/176
- And all of this raises the question that lurks behind all questions about aid and charity ... about discerning between the deserving and the undeserving poor.

But while all of this clever moral questioning goes on, you still have the simple human scenario of a human being desperately thirsty and another human being with the means to offer water and aid ...

And for Jesus, faced with this woman at the well, it was as simple as that ...

And while the crisis continues in East Africa ... it is as simple as that ...

The worrying thing is that we never discover whether Jesus ever got his drink of water ...

So let's move on to the thirsty woman.

But let's then move on in the story, because the encounter that begins with a thirsty man asking for a drink of water from a woman with a jar sitting beside the well, ends up in a conversation that is all about a woman who is thirsty for love and thirsty for God.

Have you ever been in one of those conversations that keeps on changing direction?

You start off talking about the price of bread ... and then suddenly you find yourself sharing anecdotes about holidays ... and then someone randomly shifts the conversation to the philosophy of Hegel ... and you end up talking about problems with getting to sleep at night. And at the end of the conversation you are not quite sure how you got from one subject to another ... let alone whether there were any logical links.

And Jesus' conversation with this woman seems to take these sorts of turns.

It all begins nice and logically, with Jesus taking the opportunity of his conversation about his need for a drink of water, to tell the woman about the living water that he is able to offer her.

The woman seems initially to think that Jesus is talking about a personalised spring in her back garden that will avert the need for her to travel to the well every day.

She thinks Jesus is offering to give her, if not the entire village, a better water supply than Jacob had bequeathed to the village in the village well.

And Jesus tries to explain that what is on offer is a wholly different kind of water -

“Everyone who drinks that water that I give will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.”

But the woman still doesn't seem to latch on ...

And then we have the first sudden change of direction.

“Go and call your husband ...” Where did that question come from?

At which point emerges the rather sorry back-story of this woman. We discover that she is a woman who has had five husbands, and whose present partner is not her husband.

And then it's the woman's turn to change the subject – hardly surprising with the rather sensitive subject matter that Jesus had brought up.

‘Let's talk about worship' the woman says.

And Jesus goes along with the idea of having a conversation about worship. And we have this remarkably profound statement by Jesus about true worshippers worshipping the Father in spirit and in truth.

But the woman doesn't seem too interested in taking this further. It is almost as if she is surprised that Jesus took her seriously at all. So she changes the subject again.

‘Worship – been there, done that, got the t-shirt – oh, let's talk about the Messiah now.’

In response to which Jesus gives perhaps the most direct answer of all: “I who speak to you am he.”

So we have this meandering conversation. What is happening in this rather random flow of ideas?

- Starts with the promise of a spring of water welling up to eternal life?
- Moves onto to a conversation about the woman's complicated and questionable life-story
- Takes a sudden turn into a theological question about worship
- And then comes Jesus affirming himself as Messiah to this woman of all people.

Well, actually all of this is about Jesus addressing a woman who is thirsty for love and thirsty for God. That's probably not how she would have described herself when she went to the well that morning. But this was the woman that Jesus saw.

Now even in 21st century Britain a woman with that kind of back-story is something of a rarity.

We probably should not jump to conclusions about the morality of this woman. Some of her previous husbands may have died. However, all of the indications are that her situation was morally suspect. Otherwise, why else would she have been fetching water at noon?

She may have been the victim of a string of marriages in which she was cruelly used and abused by husbands, who felt that because of her past they could marry her and then discard her as soon as they wanted to move on.

And Palestine at that time was no environment for a woman to make a go of it as a single woman. There were few career opportunities for single women ... if you wanted any amount of security you could only find it in a marriage relationship ... and in that relationship all the power was held by the man.

Or, of course, she could have been a woman who, for whatever reason, found it incredibly difficult to remain faithful to one man ... and her own unfaithfulness was the cause of the breakdown of each of her marriages ... and now she finds herself living with a man outside of marriage.

Here is a woman who, for whatever reason, is unable to sustain relationships – she enters into a relationship and – we don't know why – but that relationship collapses. And she staggers into another relationship ... but history repeats

itself. And the pattern of relationship and break-up seems to have become cyclical for her.

She knows that she needs to be in relationship, but she cannot seem to make the relationships work.

She is thirsty for love, but for whatever reason, she has not learned the skills of living in a fulfilled and fulfilling loving relationship. Either she is a hurt and wounded person who finds herself always in relationships with men who will abuse and use her. Or she is a hurt and wounded person who has been so let down by other people, that she finds herself unable to commit to any relationship fully ... and ends up letting others down.

And it is quite possible that she is so thirsty for love that she will be taken in by anyone and everyone ... and actually unable to discern and understand the difference between being loved and being used ...

But Jesus recognises that her thirst for love, will only ultimately be resolved and transformed through the quenching of her thirst for God. This is where transformation will begin for this woman.

She does not need to be reprimanded and upbraided, shamed or told off for her past ... she needs to discover an encounter with God who will satisfy her deepest thirst ... because in this encounter both her thirst for God and her thirst for love will be satisfied.

In this encounter she will find at last dignity, wholeness, satisfaction, security ... that comes from being loved by God ...

When Jesus speaks to this woman about worship in spirit and truth – the truth that he is talking about is not a set of ideas of propositions and ideas that we have to agree with – it is about honest and open encounter with God.

God who sees and knows us fully and loves us fully for who we are – no masks, no hiding, no pretense – honest encounter ... and in that encounter discovering that we are deeply loved.

And Jesus models that honest, open, loving encounter for this woman as the Messiah of God, in asking her for a cup of water.

Here you are encountering the Messiah of God, who knows you for who you are ... and yet still offers you the gift of God ... living water welling up to eternal life

... This is how encounter with God in worship can be for you – worship in spirit and in truth ...

She was thirsty for love, for approval, for acceptance, for companionship, for dignity ... and yet her life had so spiralled out of control that she could find them nowhere ...

Except that she found them again in this meeting at the well, in a conversation that should never have happened with Jesus ...

And she found them all in abundance from the living God, in whom she found her deep thirst quenched in a rich supply of living water welling up to eternal life.

And we know that she is transformed, because suddenly this woman who avoids, at all costs, contact with the rest of the village suddenly runs off with great enthusiasm to round everyone up to come and meet Jesus ...