

**15 March 2020**

**Exodus 17.1-7**

**John 4.5-26**

We have heard of the lives of women and young girls in Ethiopia being restricted and challenged because they have no access to water.

We have also heard what a dramatic difference the provision of a clean water supply can make to women and girls, and indeed whole communities.

Water – life-giving, life-refreshing, life-invigorating. A basic human need.

Access to water is a powerful symbol of the way in which we are divided as a world ...

- for the rich a water shortage usually means not being able to water their gardens
- for the poor a water shortage been life and death

And water sometimes divides communities.

In 2015 in Siraha, Nepal the family of 65 year old Pulakit Mallik Dom were forbidden from using the village well. Why? Because they belonged to the “untouchable” Dalit cast, and those who belonged to the higher casts in the village refused to share with them the same water supply.

After the police were called in to allow the family access to the well, the rest of the villagers stopped using the well themselves.

And I could have chosen other stories that are found on news websites from South Asia.

Many Christians in South Asia come from the untouchable Dalit class – and they have known this kind of discrimination. It is, then, no wonder that the story of Jesus meeting the woman from Samaria at the well is a particular favourite. It speaks to their situation.

They know what it is to be shunned at the well. They understand a woman who dares only to make her trip to the well in the heat of the midday sun so that she will be confident of being alone. No recriminations ... no stares ... no insults. She

is clearly the untouchable woman from her village. The outsider. The gossiped-about.

They have been in her shoes – knowing what it is to be rejected, cut off, unwanted, treated as dirt.

They also feel the surprise of this woman when Jesus asks her for a drink. Jesus the man. Jesus the Jew. Jesus the rabbi/teacher.

Asking a woman ... a Samaritan woman ... an outcast Samaritan woman ... for a drink of water.

Sharing the same well; sharing the same drinking vessel; sharing the same water.

They share her surprise, because they have so seldom been in her shoes when it comes to this experience. And they knew it was a once in a lifetime experience for this woman.

They understand how she would have been knocked off balance and taken aback.

This woman coming to the well at midday to draw her water – a potent symbol of a woman who is an outsider – an unwanted neighbour – but like everyone else, still in need of water.

And then Jesus, asking this woman for a drink – and even more potent symbol of his healing the wounds of our broken lives and our broken societies.

In his simple request for a drink, a revolution has begun to happen in the life of this woman ... and the Dalits in reading this story feel the reverberations of this encounter in their own lives.

It is as if, in speaking to this woman and asking her for a drink, Jesus has not only crossed the divide between male and female, Jew and Samaritan, but he has also crossed all divides ... he is reaching out and sharing a drink of water with all of the unwanted and untouchables of our world.

But then Jesus goes much further than simply making a 'social point' by this powerful gesture. He not only meets and accepts her where she is. He then wants to take her to an altogether different place in her life.

To open up a new world for her –

- not only a world where men and women can live in community, overcoming the power dynamics of a gendered world
- and not only a world where Jews and Samaritans can share a conversation as two equal human beings

But also a world where she will be opened to the wider horizons of life in community with God.

Jesus invites this woman to live more deeply. To connect with a part of herself that had been neglected, repressed, buried.

And he does this by getting into a conversation where Jesus and the woman appear to be talking at cross purposes.

Jesus uses the conversation about the drink of water to make an offer to her of 'living water.'

Now in the same way that jokes that rely on puns don't translate well into another language, so the misunderstanding at the heart of this conversation doesn't translate well into English.

That's because the phrase 'living water' has a double meaning. Because of the life-giving properties of water, the phrase 'living water' was used to describe any source of fresh, flowing water. So it is no wonder that the woman thinks that Jesus is talking about the gift of a spring in her own backyard.

Was Jesus going to provide her with a never-ending supply of water to outdo the gift of the well, given by Jacob?

But Jesus wanted to open this woman to a conversation on a different level. He wanted to open this woman to an experience at a different level. He wanted to open this woman to part of herself that she kept deeply hidden under the demands and distractions of daily living. He wanted her to assuage her thirst not just for water, but for the presence of God. He wanted her to find a well that was already deep within her, if only she could connect.

When Jesus says to her, "If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water."

... the woman replies, "Sir, you have nothing to draw with and the well is deep."

Could Jesus have equally said this to her? Well yes and no.

The well that Jesus was inviting her to draw from was indeed deep.

But I don't think Jesus believed that she had nothing to draw with ... at least not with his help.

He knew that she could draw from this well ... this well of God's life-invigorating, life-renewing presence. Indeed she could draw from this well and it would become a spring of water welling up to eternal life.

Jesus uses this wonderful poetic imagery to speak of the life-refreshing presence of God.

But her mind is stuck at a more prosaic level. She doesn't get the poetry ... she misses the invitation in the words of Jesus to enter into something deeper in her life.

She hears the words, but is stuck in her world of having to come to this wretched well to get water away from public gaze. And all that she can think of that will make her life better, is if she had her own water supply. That's the only living water she is really bothered about.

She doesn't want to have to keep going through the humiliation of it all day after day.

And it is so easy to understand her reaction.

Why should she start to explore all of this other stuff about living water, when the everyday problems of her life are just mounting up?

And yet Jesus knows that it is this deep connection with God that will utterly transform her – will make all the difference for her.

And by doing this he is not ignoring all of her personal problems, but he wants to give her a new resource in order to face her world. He wants to give her a new understanding of herself as a person that will equip her to live a transformed life. He wants her to reach down into the depths of her life and discover a thirst that she has forgotten, or never known, and find the resources to quench that thirst in the life of God.

He knows that he is speaking to a woman, as are all women, as are all people ... whose well is deep ... and he wants her to stop living on the surface, living for the immediate.

She probably thought of herself as a pretty shallow person. That's the story that everyone told her, because of her chequered life history. Five husbands and living with a man who is not her husband.

The pressures on her just to survive with any kind of dignity would have been huge ... especially when it is usually the women who are to blame and who bear more of the shame than the men.

She would have carried around with her all of the cares of the world.

But she probably saw herself as shallow. Eagerly searching for whatever scraps of attention and warmth she could find from anyone. But no one probably treated her seriously as a person.

But Jesus does!

He doesn't see her as shallow, but as a woman with a deep well, and with a depth of life in which she, even *she*, could find a relationship with God.

And what Jesus does with this woman, he does with us all. He opens us all to the deep well that is within us. To connect with God

To discover that our lives are not just the immediate and the urgent and the surface and the now.

But they are the deep, the eternal, and the really important.

And we end up filling our minds with all of the things that press in upon us in this world – the everyday things that seem so pressing, so important ... We cannot get coronavirus off our newsfeeds, out of our conversations, off our minds ... and it seems to be overwhelming us.

But in the midst of all of the things that our minds race off to, Jesus says 'Dig deep'.

Discover the life-giving presence of God. Stop. Take time. Make space.

Dig deep into those wells that are deep within us ... in which there are different reserves ... in which we can open ourselves to the well-springs of God's love and life welling up within us.