



The Anglican Parish of Whangaparaoa Peninsula
3 Stanmore Bay Road,
Whangaparaoa, Auckland, N.Z.
www.ststephenswgp.org.nz

Sermon

The Water of Life

John 4:5-42; Exodus 17:1-7

15th March 2020

© 2020 The Revd Ian Hardcastle

I learnt this week that the choice of Gospel readings for Lent in Year A of the Lectionary cycle are all about individuals encountering Jesus. This is an ancient practice of the Church going back to the preparation of candidates for baptism at Easter. This Lent we hear the stories of Nicodemus, the Samaritan woman, the man born blind then Lazarus. As we hear these stories we are following in the footsteps of sisters and brothers in the early centuries of the church. As we hear them, be encouraged in your following of Jesus and see if you can meet him through the record of these encounters.

We have the amazing account in John 4 of a long conversation of an individual with Jesus. It is remarkable as she herself points out because he crosses social, moral, ethnic and religious barriers in talking to her.

There was the barrier that a devout, observant Jew of that time would not even talk to his own wife in public. Men and women did not have free and easy social engagement as we do. Yet Jesus asked her for water and engaged in conversation with her. Why was she drawing water from the well at midday? It was done in the cool of the morning or the evening. We can infer why: she is rejected by the other women because her morality is at best questionable – she had had five husbands and was then cohabiting with a man. By the way, our society wants to equate cohabitation with marriage but, Jesus clearly did not think so. He said the man she was living with was not her husband. Nonetheless, Jesus pressed through social and moral barriers to reach her.

Then there was the ethnic and religious barrier between the Jews and the Samaritans. The Samaritans were a mixed race people who kept some of the Law of Moses but in an impure manner. When the Northern kingdom was conquered by the Assyrian empire, they followed their normal policy of displacing conquered peoples. So the Jews were deported elsewhere and other conquered people were brought in to repopulate the land. In fact, the people there ended up as a mixed race, of Jewish and pagan gentile interbreeding following a corrupt form of the Jewish religion. Jewish people tried to avoid travelling through Samaria yet, Jesus had walked right in and asked for water from the first person he met. She was surprised and so were the disciples. They returned from getting food from the village and found the conversation going on. John tells us they were surprised but didn't dare ask Jesus, "What do you want?" or "Why are you talking with her?"

It is remarkable because we see her response. She is effectively a village outcast, but once she understands that Jesus is the Messiah, she goes to tell the villagers who come to see and are convinced that Jesus is the Saviour of the World. She became, in effect, the first Apostle to the Samaritans as she is known in the Eastern Orthodox Church.

There is much richness in this passage and I can only scratch the surface. May I urge you to read it over and ponder Jesus words, the way he talks to her and the result? There is much we can learn about significant conversations. It is fascinating the way Jesus and the woman are talking at different levels so that she keeps misunderstanding him, yet in the end he leads her to the declaration that he is the long-awaited Messiah – "I who speak to you am he," or more literally, "I am the one speaking to you." It is another of the 'I am' divine claims of Jesus.

The aspect of the conversation I want to explore is the living water. We start with the Old Testament reading. It is set during the wilderness wandering of the Hebrew people after they had left Egypt and made their way to Palestine. It is harsh country and they were not only a multitude but had their flocks and herds as well. At Rephidim there was no water and their anxiety rose up in grumbling and quarrelling. If your tank has run low and no tanker has been available you may get anxious – but there is water around even if you have to fill flagons here and take them home. If there was no water and a dry land, you can imagine tempers would rise. We see odd reports of fights in supermarkets over scarce resources in some parts of Europe at present.

In that situation, God provided water miraculously. God instructed him, "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."¹

So God provided water for the people. St Paul commented on this in 1 Corinthians 10:1-4,

For I do not want you to be ignorant of the fact, brothers, that our forefathers were all under the cloud [that is the cloud which was the presence of the Angel of the Lord leading them] and that they all passed through the sea. They were all baptised into Moses in the cloud and in the sea. They all ate the same spiritual food and drank the same spiritual drink; for they drank from the spiritual rock that accompanied them, and that rock was Christ.

Paul states that Christ accompanied the Hebrews in the wilderness. Remember they ate manna for those forty years - a daily provision of God which came down like dew and sustained them. After the feeding of the 5000, John reports a conversation which has parallels to this Samaritan woman's conversation. Those who had been fed wanted more and said,

John 6:31-35 Our forefathers ate the manna in the desert; as it is written: 'He gave them bread from heaven to eat.'" Jesus said to them, "I tell you the truth, it is not Moses who has given you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world." "Sir," they said, "from now on give us this bread." Then Jesus declared, "I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry, and he who believes in me will never be thirsty."

Jesus is the bread of life. God fed the Hebrews with spiritual food – the manna. Jesus is the true bread of God. God gave them water from the rock and Paul says Jesus – the pre-incarnate Christ - was the rock from which water came.

So here in the gospel account we hear Jesus telling this woman that he would give living water. Literally that idiom might running water, but Jesus means more than that by it. This living water satisfies so you don't need to drink again. This living water becomes a spring of water welling up inside us.

As Jesus said later, "He who believes in me, out of his belly shall flow rivers of living water – this he spoke of the Holy Spirit." It was the rock which gave the flow of water in the wilderness and we are told that rock was Christ. The water is not him but comes from him. The water is the Holy Spirit, who is given by Jesus. When we come into relationship with God through Jesus, we are born again, given a new spiritual life. When we invite the Holy Spirit to come to us, he causes that spring of water to rise within us and minister to others around us.

Have you asked Jesus to be your saviour? To use the language of spiritual food and water, we need to feed on the bread of heaven. Jesus said, I am the bread of life.

¹ Ex 17:6

Have you asked Jesus to give you living water of the Holy Spirit? Have you invited him to well up within you spreading life to all around? Have you seen the effect of water in a dry area? Near a stream there is greenery but at a distance it is dry and dead. So too with the Holy Spirit in us. He will spill from us if we submit to him and that brings life to those who receive him – just as it was with the woman at the well. Jesus came full of the Spirit. That life spilt onto her and drew her into life until she was able to hear that he was the Messiah. Then she was quick to tell people of this fulfilment of their hopes and many came to believe in him.

Heavenly Father, I come to You, the Fount of Life, and ask that You fill my heart with your Living Waters. Let your Holy Spirit well up in my heart with life and love for everyone: expressed in what I will and say and do. Let your life pour forth from me to embrace, comfort, guide and sustain all who You bring across my path in life. This I ask through Jesus Christ, who told the woman at the well that if she asked he would give the Living Water. Amen.

All scriptural quotations are taken from the *Holy Bible: New International Version*® ©1972, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Societies.
Used by permission of Zondervan Publishing House. All rights reserved.