

**Sermon Preached in final act of public worship before coronavirus shut
down Sunday March 15th 2020**

Self-Isolating and the Woman at the Well

Readings for Lent 3: Exodus 17.v.1-7 and John.4.v.5-30,39-42

Please bear in mind that this was written to be spoken!!

It is a story about a self-isolating woman and her solitary trip to get water and at the absolutely worst time of day – 12 noon in the heat of the midday sun.

It's a story about a man who needs help and receives it from someone he should not be in contact with.

In Exodus it's a story about the desperation of being stuck in a seemingly endless search for safety, sanctuary and homeland, in which the Israelites cry out:

'Is the Lord among us or not?'

Well, the answer is 'yes, yes, yes' the Lord is here as witnessed in the immediacy of the response of the woman at the well.

If we open *our* hearts, then, when, as I suspect will happen, we are unable to gather together as one body, the Lord will still be with us in our homes, our telephone calls, in our inventive new ways of sharing in worship, and in life's sorrows and turmoil's.

The Samaritan woman was open to revelation and enlightenment; without her open heart she would not have recognised the divine in Jesus, she would perhaps have offered him a drink and gone on her way. As it was, she was so excited by her discovery that she left her water container and rushed off to fetch others to see him.

What a contrast with Nicodemus last week, who had to approach Jesus under cover of darkness, and as far as we know slopes away again, no story there of rushing off to share the good news.

Again, in contrast, when the idea of living water is offered to Nicodemus he is puzzled and discombobulated by the idea, whereas the Samaritan woman seems to fully understand the living water analogy:

“The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.” The woman said to him, “Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water”

It is the case that in John’s gospel, those most receptive to Jesus and his message are the people least bound up with hierarchies and power and status. So, Nicodemus the Sanhedrin leader contrasts starkly with the woman passed from one husband to another, from a tribe utterly despised by the Jews, an outcast who knows just what it is to be exposed to the prejudices of the world.

Hierarchy and power are things that remain today some of the biggest barriers to an open-hearted faith.

Power and status continue to create a dangerous barrier between us and our vulnerability and our connectedness with others.

When we can **pay** our way out of problems; we don’t have to **pray** our way out of problems.

This is something that this current pandemic opens up in our community, there are some who can distance themselves from social contact through wealth and property; on the whole it is the well paid who can work from home.

Carers and cleaners and nurses, the homeless and the prisoner and many more do not belong to this group.

Back in Exodus, the Israelites test ‘Massah’ and quarrel ‘Meribah’ and if Moses had not had faith in God, the quarrels would have turned to fighting and the refugee community would have imploded. Instead he was able to find strength in God to bring refreshment, living water and peace to his people.

So where and how will we find God in these times?

Where will we find strength in God to bring refreshment, living water and peace?

Will we test God and quarrel amongst ourselves, or will we hold fast to faith?

Will we see God in ICU?

In the supermarket melee?

Will we, like Moses, be able to stop our communities imploding and self-destructing?

Can we share the good news in our community in the way that Samaritan woman did?

I believe we can, I believe that we have a profoundly important role to play in the coming weeks and months.

Through our conversations, our behaviour, in the ways we our model community without putting people at risk , in what we do and do not say on social media, in the initiatives we take, in our PRAYER life, in our generous hearts and our faith in a God of love, in how we cope with not knowing what's coming towards us.

When Jesus sees the Samaritan woman, when Jesus sees Nicodemus, he sees the whole of them; their past, their present and their future.

With the woman he sees who she *has* been, *what* she yearns for, *how* she hurts, and *all that she might become*.

And he names it all.

Some of you will remember last year's Lent course when people who were in the madhouse recounted their encounters with Jesus – these powerful moments of recognition, encounters with someone who had the capacity to look into their souls, to see the whole person.

Now think of the activity with the canal and lock picture from this year's Lent Course, and the looking back, looking forward, 'in the moment' contrasts - the Samaritan woman was in the lock, the water level was changing imperceptibly around her and she had no idea where it would lead but she knew the lock gates were opening.

We are like that now with the coronavirus, we know how we have arrived here, we know how it feels.....

(at this point if you take a step back and check in on yourself and or with those near you how is it feeling right now?)

.....but we cannot see where it is leading.

In the middle of THIS we can allow God's love to work in and through us so that as the water rises, we rise with it to move out through the lock gates to whatever is waiting and we will be on the right level to sail onwards.

In the words of our next hymn Dear Lord and Father of Mankind:

‘re-clothed in our rightful minds
in purer lives thy service find
in deeper reverence praise’

As usual I cannot leave you without a poem! So here is a poem written for our times by Lynn Ungar, it will be left on the altar for all who visit in the coming weeks:

Pandemic

What if you thought of it
as the Jews consider the Sabbath--
the most sacred of times?
Cease from travel.
Cease from buying and selling.
Give up, just for now,
on trying to make the world
different than it is.

Sing. Pray. Touch only those
to whom you commit your life.
Centre down.

And when your body has become still,
reach out with your heart.
Know that we are connected
in ways that are terrifying and beautiful.
(You could hardly deny it now.)
Know that our lives
are in one another's hands.
(Surely, that has become clear.)
Do not reach out your hands.
Reach out your heart.
Reach out your words.
Reach out all the tendrils
of compassion that move, invisibly,
where we cannot touch.

Promise this world your love--
for better or for worse,
in sickness and in health,
as long as we all shall live.

AMEN

Hymns sung were: Be thou my Vision, Dear Lord and Father, Just as I am
without one Plea.

Rev Helen Burnett

GOSPEL READING - John 4 v 5 – 30, 39- 42

So he came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon.

A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink." (His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.) The Samaritan woman said to him, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.) Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water." The woman said to him, "Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?" Jesus said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life." The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water." Jesus said to her, "Go, call your husband, and come back." The woman answered him, "I have no husband." Jesus said to her, "You are right in saying, 'I have no husband'; for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!" The woman said to him, "Sir, I see that you are a prophet. Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem." Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth." The woman said to him, "I know that Messiah is coming" (who is called Christ). "When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us." Jesus said to her, "I am he, the one who is speaking to you." Just then his disciples came. They were astonished that he was speaking with a woman, but no one said, "What do you want?" or, "Why are you speaking with her?" Then the woman left her water jar and went back to the city. She said to the people, "Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?" They left the city and were on their way to him. Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman's testimony, "He told me everything I have ever done." So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them; and he stayed there two days. And many more believed because of his word. They said to the woman, "It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Saviour of the world."

OLD TESTAMENT READING – Exodus 17 v 1- 7

From the wilderness of Sin the whole congregation of the Israelites journeyed by stages, as the LORD commanded. They camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink. The people quarrelled with Moses, and said, “Give us water to drink.” Moses said to them, “Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the LORD?” But the people thirsted there for water; and the people complained against Moses and said, “Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?” So Moses cried out to the LORD, “What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me.” The LORD said to Moses, “Go on ahead of the people, and take some of the elders of Israel with you; take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. I will be standing there in front of you on the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it, so that the people may drink.” Moses did so, in the sight of the elders of Israel. He called the place Massah and Meribah, because the Israelites quarrelled and tested the LORD, saying, “Is the LORD among us or not?”