

Sermon15 March 2020

Readings: Exodus 17:1–7; John 4:5-42

FSHS

Living Water

The common thread in our Old Testament and Gospel readings today, is that both readings involve water and are about human thirst and God’s provision. Human thirst and God’s provision.

In our Genesis reading, the children of Israel have been led into the desert, escaping from slavery. Water is scarce, and they begin to complain that they are thirsty, and they complain that Moses and God have led them into the desert to die. Some of them even begin to say that they preferred the slavery in Egypt. At least in their captivity, they had food, shelter and more importantly, water. They had the whole Nile River in fact - the longest freshwater river in the world.

A friend of mine happens to be touring Egypt at the moment and on his Facebook page he showed pictures of the Nile and wrote, “what was Moses thinking by leaving Egypt and the beautiful Nile?”

In our reading this morning, the people of Israel find themselves in the desert without water. And in a miraculous turn of events, Moses is told by God to strike a rock - and when Moses does so, fresh water begins to gush from the rock. The thirst of the people is quenched through God’s provision.

As a metaphor, the story is saying – our true thirst is a spiritual thirst and can only be satisfied by God. A bit like saying, ‘man cannot live on bread alone’. ‘Water’ is a metaphor for ‘God’, or the ‘life’ that comes from God. ‘Only God can satisfy our deepest thirst’.

The story also tells us about ourselves as people. We blame other people, and ultimately, we blame God, when things don’t go well for us, or when our thirst is not met.

I think that is how a Jewish rabbi might also interpret this passage from Genesis. And we’ve got to remember that this story first belonged to the Jewish people. It is about *their* journey with God.

I’m probably over-simplifying the Genesis story when I say this, but **the whole Genesis story conveys one underlying message: “You’ve got to leave home, to find home”.** ‘Home’ for the Jewish people was Egypt. But they only discovered who they really were as a people, by leaving Egypt and going through the Exodus experience. Their

spiritual and political 'formation' as a nation, happened through their experience of the Exodus. They found their identity and their true home by leaving home.

Even today, the most significant Jewish celebrations are centred around the events of the Exodus.

In a few weeks' time, during our Holy Week leading up to Easter, some of us will be joining a Messianic Jewish group to celebrate Seder – seder is the meal following the Jewish holiday that celebrates the Exodus. Seder is the meal that became the Christian 'Last Supper'.

But today's Old Testament lesson was about the God who satisfies our human thirsts. Our thirst for meaning and purpose, our thirst for our own identity, our thirst for a direction in life, our thirst for a place to belong, our thirst for security, our thirst for inner peace, our thirst for human love, and ultimately, our thirst for God.

Our Gospel lesson is not so different from our story of the water from the rock. It is also about thirst and satisfying an inner thirst. Human thirst and God's provision.

A Samaritan woman with a suspect reputation came to the village well, at a time when she thought she was avoiding the village gossipers and the busy bodies. And she ends up in a theological discussion with a rabbi Jesus about where the true worshippers should be worshipping.

The conversation about what is true religion and what is not, is really a smoke screen concealing the deeper issues that the woman wants to keep to herself. You've probably had that kind of religious discussion with people who blame religion for all the problems in the world-usually fruitless discussions that lead nowhere.

Jesus draws the debate to a close by saying, ⁴'God is spirit, and those who worship God must worship in spirit and truth.' In other words, the location doesn't matter. God is a spirit. Is everywhere present and cannot be contained in a single location.

Jesus sees through the smokescreen of religious debate, and immediately picks up on the woman's real issues - her thirst for a deep and loving relationship, a loving relationship that she has been unable to find, even though she has been married five times.

I'm not a psychotherapist, but the woman in the story seemed to under-value herself and suffered from the belief that 'other people' (namely the five men she married) were responsible for her happiness. She could not see that being happy was her own responsibility. And she didn't like herself enough, to enjoy her own company.

What also strikes me in this story, is that Jesus didn't say to the woman, "You've been married five times, you are a horrible sinner and you need to repent." I don't

think she needed to hear that message. Some of us don't need to be told we're sinners, we already know how bad, how unworthy, and how full of the wrong choices we are. **What we do need to hear, is that God loves us despite what we are, and just as we are, warts and all.**

In the conversation, Jesus gave the woman an insight into her own 'thirst', and why she was a slave to the cyclic behaviour of falling in love over and over and being disappointed every time.

It was the first time in her life that someone had explained to her the cause of her own self-destructive behaviour.

Leaving behind her water jar, and armed with that new insight, she hurried back to the town, no longer afraid to face the people whose criticism she once feared. Her message to her detractors was her gospel – or her Good News: 'I have found someone who explained to me everything about myself. Or in her own words: ²⁹'Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! Come and see the One who explained to me everything about myself!

The woman's thirst had been satisfied by the insight given to her by Jesus. The insight and her new self-awareness had become for her – a drink of Living Water.

Yesterday at the Presbytery in Palmerston North, one of the young speakers (a Baptist Youth Pastor) asked us the question, "How many of us would be afraid to go out on the street right now and tell people what Christ means to us?" I think he was pointing the finger at us Presbyterians who are not known for our public testimonies.

Even though we are not known for our public evangelism, it is important that we be able to share our good news about God with the people in our own small circle of friends – may be with the two or three people who know us well. We could do this in the way that Jesus did it. Without condemnation, and with a lot of compassion, understanding and acceptance. What we have to share could be the living water that someone has been thirsting for.

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