

life-giving water

a sermon preached on the
third sunday in lent

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at

st john's

ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL

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the lections: Exodus 17: 1-7; Romans 5: 1-11; John 4: 5-42

I want to start today with two questions for us to ponder.

What are the things that bring you to life? and

How many times have you been mistaken about the things that bring you life?

Let's unpack these a little bit: first, what are the things that bring you to life? And by "bring to life" – I mean what are those things that energise you, that wake you up, that fill you with hope, that stir your senses so that you taste and smell and see and hear and feel things in a more vivid way, the things that wake up your spirit.

Are they?

Work challenges?

A particular person or relationship?

The smell of food that you love

Planning a holiday

A warm welcome into someone's home?

The promise of a new book, yet unopened

The music of Wagner

Being given a problem to solve

Gossip

The sound or someone's voice on the phone

Winning an argument

Being in an argument . . . we could keep on going . . .

And then to the second question: how many times have you been mistaken about the things that bring you to life? In other words, how much hope, time and energy, have you invested in various aspects of life, only to find that, after a momentary spark in your "liveliness", things are as they have always been. These things that we try out might be aspects of life that come greatly recommended by others . . . those we respect, those we model ourselves on, or by society at large. Perhaps I need to add here, that I am not trying to shame anyone: it seems to me this is the nature of life – that we cannot find the thing that really touches our spirit, the pearl of great price, without collecting numerous inferior pearls along the way.

If we understand this season of Lent as a time of examination, then one aspect of this would be to examine the things we are devoting ourselves to: the things we are investing our hopes in, that we are putting our energies into, and organising our lives around. And here in the lectionary today we have a story right on this question of where we look for meaning: in the quite lengthy, and not uncomplicated, story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well. This is a story chock-full of symbolism, starting with a well that looms large in Samaritan

history, a well gifted by the great ancestor Jacob to his sons and daughters, indeed Jacob is associated with a miracle in which the water from that well would bubble to the top and continuously overflow.

Putting the symbolism aside for a moment, however, there is good reason for Jesus to be sitting by the well – he and his disciples have been making the northward journey from Judea into Galilee (a 3 day walk), and they are making their way through Samaria. Jesus is no doubt thirsty as well as hungry and he is settling in for a rest.

Enter the Samaritan woman. The encounter doesn't get off to the greatest start, as the woman reacts to this Jewish man's decision to speak to a woman, to speak to a Samaritan woman, and to even be prepared to drink out of the same vessel that a Samaritan person has used. "How is it", she says, in a voice laced with sarcasm, "that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?"

This, it must be said, is a very strange thing for a Jewish man to do. Jews and Samaritans, you will remember, do not see eye to eye: Jews disdain the Samaritans as people of mixed blood, and the Samaritans do not accept Jerusalem as the holy city – they are focussed on Mount Gerizim, the place where Jacob dreamt of a ladder coming down from heaven, with angels ascending and descending on it. This tension is highlighted when the disciples come back later from their food-finding mission: they are amazed at what is taking place - The NRSV uses the polite word astonished, but the greek is more like gobsmacked, dumbfounded.

What starts off badly, however, turns into a **most** interesting encounter, in which Jesus speaks words which intrigue the woman. She finds herself drawn in to an exchange that challenges everything she has ever learnt about life and her people and holy places and God.

There are a number of scenes in this drama, and I don't want to go over every detail today, but I do want to point out the way that the woman's understanding of "who Jesus is" develops over the time she spends with him.

In the first place he is simply *a Jew*: and that word spoken with real disdain.

Then she wonders whether Jesus is claiming to be "*greater than Jacob*".

And then, after Jesus speaks about her five husbands, she "sees" that he is a *prophet*. Indeed, her view of Jesus is so altered at this point in the conversation, that she leaves her precious water jar, and heads into the city, speaking of the encounter to anyone who will listen, and in such a way, that numbers decide to travel to see Jesus for themselves. This Samaritan woman comes alive in the most vivid way. By the time she reaches the city, her mind is already turning on the possibility that Jesus is the *Messiah*. "Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done. He cannot be the Messiah, can he?"

Now there are some biblical scholars who hold the view that the Samaritan woman never **really** gets who Jesus is, and that she remains stuck in literal mindset. When Jesus speaks, for example, of the water that "will become [in those who drink it] a spring of water gushing up to eternal life", she replies:

"Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw the water."

These critics also argue that what brings this woman to life, what leads her to leave the daily grind, and head in to the city, is not that she has been caught up in the thrill of Jesus' divine identity, but that she has been thrilled by his knowledge of her life.

My reading is a little different, I don't think she is stuck, she's on the way - & I think we can look to this woman for some clues about what sort of dispositions might help us to be on the way too; what dispositions of heart and mind and soul might take us ever deeper into

life and joy. (Not that we can choose to adopt a certain recommended disposition, as if it's like choosing a brand of toothpaste, but we can become more aware of what conditions help us to be responsive to life and to God.)

So, what I want to draw your attention to this morning, is that while some modern-day critics may dismiss her, Jesus does not. The dialogue continues after her literal response – not only about her background but about ancestors and mountains and holy places and worshipping in spirit and in truth. And indeed, this woman, with all her limitations, is instrumental in bringing numbers of Samaritans to where Jesus is, a gathering that ends with them asking Jesus to stay with them, which he does for two days.

There are two things that I notice about this woman.

First, that she actively participates in the conversation, that she is ready to engage in a pretty robust dialogue, and that she is not stuck in the formulas of her tribe, but is able to revise her understandings in the light of her experience.

Perhaps this is because she feels she has nothing to lose. Her personal history, five husbands, would certainly put her on the margins, but even so, and this is my second point: this is a person who is able to say how things are for her, to admit that she *is* thirsty, that she is tired from the daily grind, that the things she has tried have not brought her life in all its fullness, and that, despite all the relationships she has formed in her life, she has never, until this day, experienced being known by another human being.

It is these very dispositions, I would argue, that contribute to the Samaritan woman being brought to life on this day, to her feeling new, refreshing hope about herself and the future.

And so, from this story, a story treasured by the first community that gathered around John, to this community of St John, to this particular Lent, and to each of us.

May this Lent be a time when, in some way or other, we might meet Jesus at a well, and be shaken up a bit by that meeting!

May this Lent be a time when, like the woman at the well, we are able to admit, that despite all our efforts and cleverness, we are in fact, thirsty.

And may this Lent be a time when we discover the delight of being known by the one who is our only true source of life-giving water, the one who offers us that water as gift.