

in them a spring

a sermon preached on the
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at

st john's

ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL

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the lections: Exodus 17:1-7, John 4:1-42

My forebears arrived at the Swan River Colony in 1838 – just nine years after James Stirling rushed there with a British flag in order to keep the French out. Why would they do that? Why risk a five-month sea journey half way round the world, with early nineteenth century technology, to a place virtually unknown? My hunch is that like the Israelites in the Sinai wilderness – and like everyone else who has come to this land – they were gambling on finding a better life here.

One way or another, we are all ‘economic refugees’ – searching for a life more permanent and secure here than was possible in the lands from which we came. In the image of today’s gospel: we might say that we have all come looking for a Jacob’s ‘well’ – a permanent source – from which we could be assured of always being able to water our flocks.¹ “Give me this water,” the Samaritan woman speaks on our behalf, “so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water”.²

It is the same demand when we attempt to make life secure by the best house in the best location; the best investment in the best stock; the right membership of the right club or association; and so on. Just a glance around – and even a little self-honesty – is sufficient to reveal this widespread attitude. Everywhere, a great striving – to fashion a lifestyle, to secure stuff – which we hope will maximise our chances of not having to go to the well every day to draw water. A vast industry of financial advisers runs on the grand assumption that – with their consultant-priced help and our virtuous hard work – we can be assured a retirement lifestyle with a permanent well always at our disposal. Probably like my forebears – along with the army of ‘success’ gurus and ‘celebrities’ who sell magazines and internet sites – we all imagine that with a ‘well’ firmly under our control our thirst can be permanently assuaged!

So the voice of Jesus is deeply disconcerting. “Everyone who drinks of [such water] will be thirsty again”.³ Jesus names the shattering yet liberating truth – we are in the grip of a tragic illusion!

There is a subtle but powerful distinction in the Greek text which is obscured by English translations. When the Samaritan woman speaks about a ‘well’ she employs the Greek word which describes human-made structures.⁴ This is the kind of well or cistern that humans dig out in the earth – either to store or to collect water for later use. It turns out that this kind of well is a symbol of all our efforts to secure not only ‘lifestyle choice’ – but also, more disturbingly, our efforts to secure our image of God.

But when Jesus speaks about a *source* of water he employs an entirely different word. The Greek word put on his lips by the evangelist means a wholly natural source, a spring; a source which is completely beyond the control of humans.⁵ In fact, it is the same word the evangelist used to describe the well of Jacob⁶ – which was of course not Jacob’s clever doing, but, like the rock of Meribah,⁷ a work entirely of God’s grace.

The issue, then, is that the woman – like the Israelites in the wilderness,⁸ and like us – is looking for a source which can be constructed, controlled, secured. But Jesus tells her that such sources are always bound to dry up. That which comes from such constructed sources simply cannot quench thirst. “Everyone who drinks of [such water] will be thirsty again”.

It’s a hard truth – especially for those of us accustomed to imagining that we deserve our secured lives because we have done all this ourselves, through our own hard work. More disturbing, perhaps, for those of us who imagine we have secured ‘our Jesus’.

1 John 4:12
2 John 4:15
3 John 4:13
4 **φρεαρ** *phrear* John 4:11,12
5 **πηγη** *pēgē* John 4:14
6 John 4:6
7 Exodus 17:6-7
8 Exodus 17:1-3

This tough truth is declared at *noon*.⁹ That is to say, the day is already half spent – the morning of life cannot be recovered, there is no return to the imagined security of ‘Egypt’¹⁰ or Temple. *After* noon, it’s time to mature, to grow up – to relinquish our efforts to secure our situation. To do otherwise is to regress.

Thus, the Samaritan woman’s attempted regression¹¹ is ours. And the I AM who is speaking to us¹² pulls the rug from beneath our regression: “Everyone who drinks of [such water] will be thirsty again... 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 (πηγή *pēgē*) of water gushing up to eternal life.”¹³

Familiar words, of course. But do we notice *where* the gushing water will spring from? I suspect we have so made of Jesus an external object of worship, that we might not notice what the text actually says. Jesus does not declare himself to be the spring. Listen again to the evangelist: “The water that I will give will become *in them* a spring”. Every person – made in the image and likeness of God – is to become a spring from which living water gushes!

This, then, is our vocation – in the way of which the Lenten journey makes a forty-day space for us. True worship is not located on a mountain – or in a Temple. “Woman, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem”.¹⁴ This also means that neither is true worship located in that temple which we have made of Jesus the historical and external figure of our worship. Such sources are always bound to be subject to drying up. “The hour is coming, *and is now here*, when the true worshippers will worship the Father *in spirit and in truth*”.¹⁵ The true temple is an inner reality!

Well, the good news is that all our constructed efforts to secure our lives against thirst – even our attempts to construct *our* Jesus as the source – will simply leave us increasingly thirsty. No matter how fervently we might *believe in* Jesus, unless we experience the gift of the eternal spring *within ourselves* – to which the sacramental Christ points – our thirst will not be quenched.

Thus, we celebrate and experience in the eucharistic mystery, that *we* are the Body of Christ: the living water is a spring *within the human person* – a reality of spirit and truth gushing up from within, and in fact, like the wind, everywhere and anywhere!

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⁹ John 4:6

¹⁰ John 4:3

¹¹ John 4:15

¹² John 4:26 Greek: **εγω ειμι** *egō eimi*. English translations erroneously insert “he”, thus obscuring Jesus’ radical use of the unpronounceable Divine name YHWH.

¹³ John 4:13-14

¹⁴ John 4:21

¹⁵ John 4:23