15 March 2020: Choral Eucharist
The Third Sunday of Lent
Exodus 17:1–7, Romans 5:1–11, John 4:5–42
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From this morning’s first reading: ‘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’.”

Nowadays it’s quite possible to go through life without ever coming across a natural source of water. When was the last time you saw a spring? - or even a well? For a number of years, I was involved in taking city children to the Lake District and I always found it telling to see how fascinated they were by the streams and waterfalls - and especially by sucking icicles or drinking straight from the beck! Children today can easily grow up with no conception that water comes from anywhere other than taps and bottles. We have turned water into a commodity.

But if that’s where we are now, it’s a very long way from where people in biblical times were. Far from being taken for granted, water in the Bible is a gift and a blessing in every sense of those words. Primarily of course this is because water was of immense economic importance in Israel and Palestine. Unlike the plains of Egypt and Mesopotamia with their huge rivers, the hill country of Palestine was dependent on rainfall. It was rain that determined the pattern of life: where villages could be established, what sort of cultivation that was practicable. That remains true today. If you drive through the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, every so often in the midst of the arid surroundings, you see lush oases of green, with crops growing abundantly. These oases are not natural. They are the Israeli settlements, surrounded by high fences and watch towers. Water is expensively pumped in from many miles away, in such quantity, in fact, that there are even swimming pools in the desert. Of course the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is a complex one – and there is certainly wrong on both sides – but the inequality in access to water is one of the clearest and most pressing signs of injustice.
So, economically and politically, water in the Holy Land was and is immensely important. But it is also important symbolically. In the Bible water is a symbol of many things. Perhaps most obviously it is a symbol of birth: in Genesis - the waters of creation; in Exodus, Moses in the bulrushes - the great leader of Israel, plucked from the water by his foster mother. But water is also a symbol of danger and death. The Flood is God’s judgement on his people’s sins; and in the book of Jonah, the storm at sea is a parable of God’s anger.

In today’s OT reading the water that the people thirst for is both symbolic and real. Journeying through the desert, they stop at Rephidim, where, as we heard, “there was no water for the people to drink”. We can sympathise with their plight, but at least part of the point of the story seems to be that the people of Israel have become complacent. They are taking God’s care for granted and have ceased to exert themselves. In the desert of Sinai water lies below the limestone surface, so sometimes what may appear to be a waterless tract actually is not, if you dig deep enough. Moses, striking the rock with his staff and producing water is, with God’s help, just doing the sensible thing: looking below the surface for the water that may already be there. And that, of course, is a lesson that is as true metaphorically as it is hydrologically: even in the most apparently arid of places, look below the surface for the water that may already be there.

Today’s gospel, the long story of Jesus’s meeting with the Samaritan woman at the well, takes up the same themes: real water and symbolic water. On a purely practical level, Jacob’s well, where they meet, is the source of the water that keeps the local community alive. But, this being John’s gospel, the practical and the symbolic are never far apart: “Everyone who drinks of this water”, says Jesus, “will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty”. What Jesus is doing here is laying claim to all the many layers of meaning that attach to water throughout the scriptures: laying claim to them and applying them to himself. Just as elsewhere he will say “I am the Light of the world”, so here he reveals himself as the water of life: “The water that I will give will become … a spring of water gushing up into eternal life”.

Stories as rich and complex – and long! – as this, leave the preacher with an impossible task. A sermon cannot hope to draw out all that this story has to say. It may help, though, to point to a couple of details. First, notice how the story begins. Jesus’s first words to the woman are: “Give me a drink”. The story starts with Jesus’s own need, his thirst.
We often behave as if our relationship with God is always one where God gives and we receive. But in doing so, aren’t we being rather like the people of Israel in the desert, behaving as if God will do everything for us? Are we taking God for granted? Strictly speaking, God, being God, cannot lack anything: God does not need us. But though God does not need us, God does want us. The Samaritan woman giving Jesus water to drink is an example of the sort of loving service that God wants us to offer him and one another.

Secondly, remember who this woman is. The Samaritans were, to the Jews, an unclean race, a people to be avoided. And, among this outcast people, this woman is herself an outcast. She has had five husbands and is now living with a man to whom she is not married. She is not the sort of woman whom an upright citizen would normally be seen talking to, let alone the sort of person from whom one would ask for a drink.

Yet the good deed she does for the thirsty Jesus sets in train a whole series of events. At the end of today’s reading we are told that “many Samaritans from that city believed in Jesus because of the woman’s testimony”. This disreputable woman, an outcast in a society of outcasts, shows us how artificial are the boundaries we set up. The Samaritan woman doesn’t think in such terms, doesn’t hide behind high fences, policed with watch towers. She shows kindness to Jesus before she knows anything about him; and it is only after she has performed her act of charity that she comes to recognise who he is, and believes in him.

And lastly, as Thomas Aquinas wrote, ‘non-living water is water which is not connected or united with the source from which it springs… living water is connected with its source and flows from it’. The water of which Jesus speaks, is living water because it reconnects with our source and origin in God: ‘The water that I will give’, he says, ‘will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.’ And eternal life, remember, is not a very long period of time to be looked forward to after we die: eternal life is God’s life, shared with us in Christ by the Spirit, here and now; lying just below the surface of our lives, if we will strike the rock and look for it in the ways in which we respond to one another and to our glorious God.

In nomine…