

SPIRITUAL THIRST

(Exodus 17.1-7 and John 4.5-32)

Stand by for some watery jokes.

Wife: There's trouble with the car. It has water in the carburettor.

Husband: Water in the carburettor – that's ridiculous!

Wife: I tell you the car has water in the carburettor.

Husband: You don't even know where the carburettor is. I'll check it out.

Where's the car?

Wife: In the river.

Two Eskimos sitting in their kayak on an icy sea were chilly so they lit a fire in the craft. It sank – proving once for all that you can't have your kayak and heat it.

Question: Why didn't they play cards on Noah's ark? Because Noah kept standing on the deck.

A man is stumbling through the woods, totally drunk, when he comes upon a preacher baptising people in the river by immersion. He proceeds to stagger into the water and bumps into the preacher who turns round and is almost overcome by the smell of alcohol but he asks the drunk *Are you ready to find Jesus? Yes, I am* replies the drunk.

So the preacher grabs him, dunks him under the water, pulls him up and asks *Brother, have you found Jesus? No, I haven't found Jesus.*

Shocked at the answer the preacher dunks him again – for a little longer.

Pulling him up he asks; *Have you found Jesus, my brother? Again the drunk answers; No, I haven't found Jesus.*

By this time the preacher is at his wit's end and dunks the drunk in the water again – this time holding him down for 30 seconds and when he begins kicking his arms and legs he pulls him up. *For the love of God, have you found Jesus? The drunk wipes his eyes and catches his breath and asks the preacher, Are you sure this is where he fell in?*

Enough of that. Do you remember in your later years at school and having exams? A favourite exam question was to give the examinee two scenarios and ask you to compare and contrast them. The two scenarios this morning

are our two readings. If I were to dare to ask you to compare and contrast them I wonder what you would say.

Well, those watery jokes are a clue... Yes, both scenarios are to do with water. In the Exodus reading we had Moses striking the rock to produce water in the desert. In the reading from John we had Jesus sitting by a well asking for a drink of water. There is, I think, another similarity. Both stories involved people who were not very nice. The Israelites, having been rescued by God from slavery in Egypt were ungrateful and moaning because they were thirsty. The woman who came to the well had a very unsavoury past. So we've got the similarities.

We might well find a contrast in that in the OT reading it was the people who made the request for water, however rudely and loudly. In the NT reading it was God in the human form of Jesus who made the request for water.

There are contrasts in the NT reading itself – all between the woman at Jacob's well and Jesus. We know about Jesus but what of the woman? To help us, let me read you part of a genuine recent obituary:

At 16, she married a man who beat her before and after the birth of their daughter. She gave her mother custody of the child and within a few years was single, struggling with drink and drugs and taking lovers of both sexes. She gave up another child for adoption then fell pregnant again. At first she claimed to have been raped but later admitted lying. She got involved in a court case which took three years by which time she had given up her third child for adoption.

That, brought up to date, was the sort of history of the woman Jesus met at the well.

Another contrast is that men in the culture of the time men and women did not have discussion with each other. As an American writer described it: *She was on the wrong side of a granite wall of ostracism. He stood on the side where men could interact freely, exchanging ideas and inquiring about beliefs and spiritual hopes. She stood beyond the range of even seeing or hearing such openness.*

A further factor in the story is that she and Jesus came from different but neighbouring countries and there was no love lost between those countries. It's as if Jesus, the Jew, had popped over from a new Israeli settlement house to the market place of a Palestinian town and started chatting up the nearest Palestinian.

But why was Jesus in Samaria anyway? Because the Pharisees were stirring up trouble for him (vv1-3) and he was getting out of their way *en route* for Galilee - taking the shortest route. So his arrival at the well when the woman was there was by chance - except that God has a way of arranging things to suit his purposes. The whole of the book of Ruth which we've been concentrating on over the last few weeks is another instance.

Something the wife of one of our vicars once said to me has stuck with me over many years – *For a Christian there is no such thing as a coincidence*. The modern word is *Godincidence*. It's happened to me more than once. Being thrown out of my digs after my first week at university because I asked for a receipt for the rent (an experience which still plagues my memory) led to an onward step in my Christian journey and also led me to start singing seriously.

Then Jesus opens a conversation with a simple request: *Give me a drink please* (v.7). The reaction to that simple request was one of shock. We are back to that picture of the Jew in the Palestinian market place. *How can you, a Jew, possibly be talking to me, a Samaritan, let alone asking a favour*.

And what about the *living water* confusion? Jesus talks about giving the woman living water (v10). Perhaps she thinks he's talking about running water. Certainly she does not understand what Jesus is saying because she asks for what he is offering. Why? *So that I won't have to bother to keep coming back here time and time again to get water out of this well*.

Then Jesus brings out her murky past. He reminds her of the whole grim story (v18) and that is a turning point in the relationship between the two. It dawns on her that this man is different - something special. Jesus explains that the Jew versus Samaritan business will be irrelevant, ending up with the words: *God is spirit and his worshippers must worship in the spirit and in truth* (v24).

This prompts her to say she knows a messiah is to come along sometime. If any of you came along to the *Puzzling Questions* series last year you will remember those street interviews where some people said *I think there's a higher being or I know there's someone up there*. The woman's statement is a bit like that. But it brings from Jesus that simple but awesome statement: ***I am he.***

And what does she do, hearing those words? She leaves her empty water pot and dashes in to town, telling all and sundry about Jesus, impelling them to go and see for themselves and in the last part of the reading we find that many Samaritans became believers.

Let me ask you (and me) some questions – not exam questions this time but, I hope, meaningful and useful ones.

Question 1 – Do you believe in miracles?

This harks back to our OT reading – the thirsty Israelites in the desert complaining to Moses and poor old Moses saying to God; *What am I supposed to do?* God had an answer – a miraculous one!

Do you remember a series we had a few years ago – *Journeys*. We saw film interviews of people healed miraculously. I am not sure about this, but I suspect God does miracles particularly when there is prayer so keep praying. I am currently praying for a miracle for a particularly difficult situation.

Question 2 - Is something bugging you? Do you feel a sense of unworthiness or of not having made the most of your life? Have you messed up?

That woman at the well (let's call her Esther) deliberately came at a time of day when the sun was at its height and when she thought no-one would be there. Why? Because she had made a mess of her life and was ashamed. Think about what Jesus said to Esther: *You are right when you say you have no husband. You've gone through five of them and the man you are living with is not your husband.* You see, Jesus knows all about our hang-ups, our problems and our often not-very-nice history.

Esther had some sense of need for something or someone, special and different; *I've heard of a Messiah*. Then those words of Jesus: *I am he. I am the one you have been looking for.*

Her life changed. Gone was the shame, the regret, the weight of her mental burden. We here, at St. Mary's this morning, whatever our background, whatever our concerns only have to turn to Jesus, who knows all about them and let him deal with them.

Question 3 – What is your reaction - and mine - to Jesus' love and concern for us?

Esther could not contain herself. Off she went to tell people about her experience and about Jesus. Her spiritual thirst satisfied, she forgot about her bucket and the water in the well.

Those of us who were across at the Derry on the evening of 2nd March, especially those who had invited people we do not see in St. Mary's, felt God's Spirit was there with us and that he had honoured those invitations. There will be other occasions for us to talk about and encourage people to come to. Next Sunday's all age service for Mothering Sunday is one. Maybe there will be an Alpha course soon. Do an Esther!

Question 4 - Can you look back and say; *It looked like a pure co-incidence at the time but I realise now that God organised it?*

I'll bet our Esther did that. What were the chances of her, a Samaritan, having a conversation with a Jewish man (and a very special one at that) when she took her weary way in the noonday sun to fill her bucket?

If you can answer yes to Question 4, say 'thank you' to God and ask for some more Godincidences!

So, with apologies to Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Water, water everywhere and lots of spiritual water to drink!