

## Third Sunday in Lent – Year A

Today's readings focus on the motif of living water. In the Hebrew Bible it is written as the 'water of life' (*maim khaim*), an expression that has a rhythmic ring to it as well as overtones of the sweetness of fresh running water. People in the ancient Middle East saw a divine power working in water to bring fertility to the land and sustain life for all living things. In rituals water was used to cleanse and renew, and ever since the escaping Hebrews were led by Moses through the Reed Sea water was regarded as a primary element of salvation.

**Exodus 17:3-7** Concerned and afraid of death by thirst in the desert the Hebrews complained to Moses about their lack of water. Turning to the Lord, Moses was advised to strike the rocks at Mt Horeb. In the Sinai there are limestone rocks that drip small amounts of water and by cracking their crust a certain amount of groundwater can be released. For Moses this involved a mighty leap of faith and the resulting quantity of dripping water was clearly seen as a miraculous gift from God that promised to maintain life.

It is interesting to see how the people were so angry that Moses believed they were ready to stone him. How would that have solved their thirst problem? We can so often turn to unreasonable behaviour when we are totally wound up by a crisis. And yet a moment of centring to create some calm, a mini-meditation if you like, can give us space to move forward without lashing out in mindless panic. Moses could easily have said, 'You guys haven't really thought this through. Stoning me is not the mature answer.'

No wonder the place was named Massah (trial) and Meribah (quarrel). Imagine calling an Aussie town 'Gone ballistic' or 'Aggroville', but that's pretty much the equivalent.

**Psalms 94/95** This psalm was obviously chosen by the Lectionary editors because of the mention of Meribah and Massah, which stood for a hardness of heart that brought on serious aggravation in the Israelite people. The poet here is calling on his people to stop and consider the gifts that they have received from the Lord. He is calling for gratitude and a proper recognition of what it means to be committed to the Creator of good things.

By counting our own blessings to cultivate an abiding sense of gratitude it becomes impossible to be negative or even complain about inconveniences or disappointments. What does grizzling achieve? There is wisdom in the old saying, 'Don't tell me your problem. Tell me what you are doing about it.'

**Romans 5:1-2, 5-8** This is a great passage from Paul reminding the Christians in the Roman community of the favours they have received. He uses the phrase 'this state of grace' but his Greek means this state of being favoured or gifted. It is through following the way of Jesus in faith that we have been beneficiaries of the gifts of the Holy Spirit.

In the previous chapter Paul pointed out that Abraham and his descendants were reckoned as just and good in the eyes of God not through rituals and mere law-keeping but through their faithfulness to God and their lives of service. He now tells the gentile Roman community that their fidelity to the way of Christ and their lives of integrity, virtue and service will enhance their relationship with God.

**John 4:5-42** It is likely that this episode will not be read out in its entirety in most parishes, meaning that some of the gems in it will risk being overlooked. The setting is a well, which is an ideal place for Jesus to bring up the metaphor of 'living water' with its ability to give life and promote growth. It goes without saying that in the hot and dry climate of Israel wells are all about life.

It is worth remembering that in Scripture the well is a common meeting place and the perfect setting for beginning and sustaining relationships. Abraham's servant met Rebecca at a well and subsequently negotiated with her family for her marriage to Isaac. Jacob met Rachel at the local well, fell in love with her and eventually married her. The well in today's reading was attributed to Jacob because it lay in Jacob's territory at the old town of Shechem, that was destroyed and replaced by the town of Sychar. In the meeting of Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well we are not surprised that a relationship begins that becomes transformative for the woman.

What strikes us as astounding from a cultural point of view is that Jesus initiated communication with the woman by asking her for a drink. This involves breaking a number of taboos. A man does not speak to an unknown unaccompanied woman in public. The offence is doubly outrageous because she is a Samaritan and Jews considered themselves unclean if they had contact with a Samaritan. If he drinks from her bucket he will become unclean. But for Jesus none of this is the least bit important when compared with the possibility of changing the life of another human being for the better.

### **John is urging us not to read Jesus literally**

As the conversation develops Jesus offers her the chance of enriching her life with ‘living water’. But then she reads him literally and scoffs at the fact that he doesn’t even have a bucket, so how can he give her living water. As a by-the-way, here is John urging us not to read Jesus literally, but to look more deeply into the poetry of his language to find the spiritual meanings there. In the previous chapter Nicodemus took Jesus literally about being born from above and thought he meant being born again, which made no sense to his left brain thinking. Later on, the people in the synagogue at Capernaum will take Jesus literally when he offers them his flesh and blood, and they will be repelled at the thought without stopping to think what he actually meant.

The water he is recommending is himself as the gift from God that brings quality life. Comparing himself to the water of life Jesus reminds us of the gift of Wisdom, which is that aspect of God that is personified in the biblical Wisdom writings as a feminine entity who delights in mixing with humanity to offer divine wisdom as a guide for living. Lady Wisdom compares her gift to water when she says, ‘Come to me, you who desire me ... and those who drink of me will thirst for more’ (Sirach 24:19–21). The contrast here is that Jesus is giving the Spirit, which is a source of life-giving revelation and wisdom that will quench all spiritual thirst.

### **It doesn’t matter at all where you worship**

Responding to Jesus’s request that she go and bring her husband the woman says she has no husband. Jesus then agrees with her and adds that, in fact, she has had five husbands. From this she deduces that he is a prophet and she begins to show him a different level of respect, which leads her to ask a serious question about worship. And here follows a perfect example of the living water of Jesus’s wisdom, namely, it doesn’t matter at all where you worship – cathedral, chapel, in the bush, in the train, driving the car, reading Scripture, meditating in a quiet spot, and so on. God is spirit, as Jesus declares, and when we worship in spirit and in truth and honesty our worship is sacred.

This episode ends on another of the favourite motifs of Jesus – food. But his food, the thing that nourishes his spirit is doing the will of the one who sent him. We could well ask, What gives me nourishment of spirit? What is it that brings me deep contentment? Do I savour my relationships to the extent that I take no one for granted? Am I a lifter and a healer in the joy I bring to others through appreciation and service?

Finally, the townsfolk begged Jesus to stay, and after two days many of the Samaritans believed in him because they had a first-hand experience of his charisma and his wisdom. Both the woman and many of her townsfolk were transformed by their personal encounter with Jesus. If we set ourselves the goal to work through a gospel we would gain a personal experience of the living water Jesus has to offer. Even if we read a page or an episode a day we would gain valuable insights that would be transformative and bring us closer to the person of Christ.

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Either we grow or we pay more for staying the same.

Norman Mailer

We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then is not an act, but a habit.

Aristotle

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Restaurant patron: ‘Waiter, I’d like a bottle of red wine.’

Waiter: ‘Certainly, sir. What year?’

Patron: ‘Well, I’d like it right now.’

*Laurie Woods*