

PExodus 17: 1-7; John 4: 4-15

*Are we thirsty?*

19.03.17

Nowadays I imagine that they would build a wall – a ‘big, beautiful wall’ between Samaria and Judea. The region of Samaria after all, was a no-go area for Jews, a tainted land that they would avoid at all costs. Centuries before they had all been part of one nation but then Israel had split into two and the northern Kingdom of Samaria in due course was overrun by foreign armies and the people inter-married and so became an impure ‘mongrel’ people. Or so the Jews thought, and so they despised Samaritans and believed that they had corrupted true worship, and it wouldn’t much surprise me if Samaritans were regarded as rapists and criminals and drug-traffickers. When Jesus told a story to demonstrate the extremes to which love must be stretched he imagined a Samaritan tending a stricken Jew by the side of the road where he had been mugged – an unlikely scenario. And normally Jews would travel a long way to circumnavigate Samaria to avoid going through it, but on one occasion when Jesus, typically, tried to pass through a Samaritan village refused him access, prompting two of Jesus’ disciples to threaten the village with fire from heaven. So there was little love lost between Jews and Samaritans and that makes the encounter between Jesus and this woman all the more remarkable. To Jesus her status as a Samaritan means nothing.

So he sits down at this well and along comes the woman and we can only say that being a Samaritan is the least of her problems. We find in due course that she has been married five times and she is not married to the man she now lives with. And of course the immediate reaction to that information is to label the woman a ‘sinner’, a woman of dubious virtue, but there is nothing to justify that judgement. After all, who knows what story of heartache and loss might lie behind those five husbands? Who knows how many of them died? Who knows how many walked out on her, divorcing her as men – but not women - could so easily do in these times on the slightest pretext? And as for living with this current man – well, in those days women didn’t have the power to proposition men and marriage would have been his call, and so she lives in a state of

perpetual insecurity – fearful of the consequences of being a woman left on her own in that world.

There is, however, one further important feature of this woman's life, something that Jesus seems to detect. She may be a despised Samaritan with a turbulent private life but the other fact about her is that she is thirsty. Now, you may say, surely it is Jesus who is thirsty in this story. He, after all, says to her, 'Give me a drink'. But there is a subtle dynamic in this narrative such that Jesus quickly turns the tables on this woman so that she becomes the one who is thirsting. Just listen again to what Jesus says to her: 'If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, "give me a drink", you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water.' In other words, 'if you knew who you were speaking to it would be you who would be thirsty!' And indeed this woman goes on to demonstrate that she is indeed thirsty – thirsty not for water but for truth, for understanding, for God. This, after all, is the longest conversation Jesus has with anyone in the Gospel story, because of the way she engages with Jesus. And so the conversation unfolds and as it does so it covers the woman's personal life as well as complex issues of theology and worship. And as we listen just hear how her understanding of Jesus develops. At the beginning of the encounter he is just a stranger, a Jew, who does this unheard of thing of asking her for a drink. But just a little further on, as Jesus shows miraculous insight into her relationships, she exclaims, 'I see you are a prophet!' But by the end of the conversation Jesus has revealed himself to her as the Messiah. 'I am he', he declares, and she rushes off to tell her city, 'Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?'

So – from stranger, to a prophet, to the Messiah in one conversation! This woman, to put it very mildly is on a steep learning curve. And why? Well, because there is in her a thirst for God. Perhaps it's because of her despised status as a Samaritan, or perhaps it's because of the pain of her relationships – but for whatever reason this woman is thirsty for God and when you are thirsty for knowledge and understanding and deeper connection it comes fast and freely!

It's so interesting – we can't really understand this passage without seeing it in the context of the previous chapter which we read last

week, where Jesus encounters a learned Jewish rabbi called Nicodemus. And Nicodemus comes to Jesus by night and Jesus speaks to him in riddles and metaphors. And Nicodemus goes away just as in the dark as when he came, understanding nothing. But now Jesus meets this Samaritan – this heretic, this ignorant woman – and again Jesus speaks in riddles but she understands completely. She gets it, as the learned rabbi doesn't. And where Nicodemus comes at night Jesus meets this woman in broad daylight, at noon, because she – despite who she is – is already in the light, already on the road to revelation and to understanding. And the reason is because, unlike Nicodemus, she is thirsty. She is a seeker after God in a way that Nicodemus is not yet. Maybe he thought he knew it all. Maybe his status and position and a Pharisee - and, as we discover later, a member of the Jewish Council – maybe these things took the edge of his thirst for God. While this woman, this Samaritan 'sinner' with her five ex-husbands in tow is crying out for the water of life.

So I ask myself: am I thirsty for God? With my theological learning and my academic degrees and my position as minister of the English Reformed Church... am I thirsty for God? Are you? I don't think our society and our culture in what we generally and vaguely call 'the West' is very thirsty for God. We don't see much sign of it and I wonder why. Maybe it is because, on the whole, we are relatively comfortable and at ease. Maybe the world of consumerism inevitably takes the edge off our spiritual thirst, if not eradicating it entirely. Why is it that in desperately poor parts of the world churches are packed and the faith thriving while we, in our relative plenty, see steep decline and indifference, if not outright hostility?

A few weeks ago the Men's Group in our church went to see Martin Scorsese's new film, 'Silence'. It's a harrowing and disturbing film about two Portuguese missionaries in the 17<sup>th</sup> century who come to Japan in pursuit of a priest, their teacher, who they have heard has committed apostasy and renounced his Christian faith under fierce persecution. The story follows one priest as he is caught and pressured to renounce his faith. For him, though, the pressure does not come through torture – at least not his torture – but rather he is treated respectfully and given comfortable surroundings, and this seems to soften him and to prepare him to eventually renounce his faith – at least publicly. The

message seems clear: comfort and ease can kill faith as effectively as torture, indeed maybe more so.

The poet T S Eliot famously took our Old Testament story this morning of the Israelites in the desert as an image for contemporary life – picturing our materialistic world from which God has been banished as a waterless wasteland in which we wander. As he wrote:

If there were water  
 And no rock  
 If there were rock  
 And also water  
 And water  
 A spring  
 A pool among the rock  
 If there were the sound of water only...  
 But there is no water...

And maybe that is an image for our militantly secular world, one that is being drained of God. But what good is it if there is water – but we are not thirsty? I think of that beautiful Psalm 42 which begins ‘As the deer pants for the water, so my soul longs after you’ – but what if it doesn’t?

Perhaps there are other reasons why we lose our thirst for God. It may be that we feel hurt by God, or let down; we feel we’ve been forgotten by God, and it will take some reassurance, some renewal of our faith get us thirsting again. Maybe, however, there is a different danger, and that is that we lose our thirst for God because we think that it has been slaked. We think we’ve been satisfied – and this surely is a problem with Jesus’ words to the woman: ‘those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty’. The suggestion here might be that with the water Jesus gives us gushing up to eternal life our thirst for God is finally satisfied and we thirst no more. And the danger with this is that surely what vitalises and drives us and keeps us growing in our faith is the thirst for God, never slaked, never satisfied. That is what keeps us learning, keeps us searching, keeps us restless. I want to pray not, ‘God, slake my thirst!’ but ‘God, keep me thirsty!’ And I fear that those who are most satisfied and least thirsty are often the ones who have God

bottled. They are those for whom faith becomes hard-edged and certain and who give the rest of us least room to manoeuvre.

Indeed I am struck that this passage from John 4 has a direct connection with John's account of Christ's passion later on, where Jesus' penultimate words on the cross are 'I am thirsty!' And bear in mind that John's Gospel Jesus on the cross is regal, enthroned, exalted. And even here in his last triumphant moments he is thirsting for God as he has done throughout his life. Even here in this climax as he is about to cry, 'It is finished!', even as God is about to engulf him in death, even as he is lifted up into glory, Jesus is still thirsty, right to the end.

So today we hold in our minds this image of thirst. We think of the Israelites in the desert, parched and desperate for water. And in this season of Lent we think of Jesus, tempted for 40 days in the desert and thirsty under the merciless sun. And we think of him thirsty at that well in Samaria and asking for water from this woman. And we think of her and her thirst for God, for truth, for understanding. And we think of Jesus crying out on the cross, 'I am thirsty!' And our prayer is that we might indeed know that spring of living water deep within us gushing up to eternal life. Let us feel it. Let us taste it. But above all keep us thirsting for it. Amen.

O God we pray today for those who are thirsty...

Thirsty for justice and thirsty for a fairer world,  
because they live in poverty and with scarce resources.

We hear of the threat of famine in Yemen, in South Sudan,  
in Somalia, in Nigeria and we hear of humanitarian aid agencies being  
stretched to breaking-point.

And we pray for NGOs and charities and aid workers,  
that they might bring relief and save life.

And we know that so often famine follows from war and conflicts  
and we pray for the peace for which the world thirsts  
in these places and elsewhere.

Lord, in your mercy,  
**Hear our prayer**

O God,

We pray for word leaders.

In the aftermath of the elections here this week  
we pray for the forming of a government,  
asking that through coalitions and negotiations and  
the blending of different political policies and priorities  
this nation may flourish, and there may be peace and  
harmony between all who live here.

And we pray for the refugees and asylum seekers  
in our midst, for the work of the World House here in Amsterdam  
with whom we are collaborating in next week's football matches.

And we pray for that event, that we may build relationships

And make friends out of strangers

Lord, in your mercy,

**Hear our prayer**

O loving God,

as Jesus reached out to the woman at the well,  
help us as your church to reach out to all,  
no matter who they are, no matter what their life-story.

Pour out your Spirit, we pray, upon your people  
and make the church a life-giving stream,

a place of refreshment for tired and thirsty people.

We pray for those in special need today:

for those who are anxious and fearful,

for those who are thirsting for human love or divine love;

we pray especially for Balazs as he goes into hospital this week  
and ask for your healing through his treatment.

Lord, in your mercy,

**Hear our prayer.**