



Sermon at the Cathedral Eucharist

The Third Sunday of Lent

readings: Exodus 17 1-7; Romans 5 1-11; John 4 5-42

12 March 2023

For 11 years of my professional life in education, I was a school timetabler. In a school of 2000 pupils located across 3 sites, it was an interesting annual challenge. I soon learnt that timetable compilers have few friends and many critics who feel they have been badly done to!

Indeed I recall that some years later, when I had become a headteacher in Nottinghamshire, being greeted by the Director of Education (herself formerly a geography teacher at my previous school but now become my ultimate boss) with the welcoming words: “Hello Alan, I’ve never forgiven you for timetabling me with bottom set double geography last thing on Friday afternoons”. A classic example of the old adage “never make enemies on your way up, for you might meet them again on your way down!”. But we got over it.

Like timetablers, lectionary compilers also may have few friends and many critics. Sometimes to the preacher, the choice of lectionary readings can seem somewhat bizarre, sometimes esoteric, and (as this morning) of surprising length.

I know that we are in the season of Lent, a season of preparation and penance, but on the face of it, the lectionary compilers seem to have gone over the top with a double-measure 37-verse reading for this 3rd Sunday of Lent. Yet if you think that’s bad, the set gospel for Lent 4 next week is actually 41 verses long, but don’t panic, we are instead celebrating Mothering Sunday with different readings. And equally panic not, for today *a long gospel surely calls for a short sermon!*

Yet I see the lectionary compilers’ problem. The gospel reading is not so much a *story* of the Samaritan woman at the well, but rather a *sequence*; it is more *a play in 5 acts*: Act 1: is setting the scene; Act 2: is the conversation between Jesus and the woman; Act 3: departure of the woman and the return of the disciples; Act 4: Jesus using the events to teach his disciples; Act 5: the woman using the events to convert her fellow Samaritans.

I could make 5 sermons out of this! But don’t worry, I am only going to focus on Act 2: the conversation between Jesus and the woman. Yet even here, commentators reckon that we have only the briefest of reports, the salient points of what must have been a very long conversation in which the Samaritan woman must have been so inspired by the emotional warmth of this strange Jewish teacher that she unburdened her soul.

This is no idle chit-chat by a well, the equivalent of chatting in a supermarket queue. *This is life-changing, all-transforming dialogue.* The woman is confronted with radical newness offered by Jesus. Her religious understanding, her categories of judgment, her whole world-meaning system, are turned upside down. Jews don’t engage with Samaritans; single men don’t converse with unaccompanied women.

Yet here is Jesus who is not intimidated by the prevailing cultural barriers of race and gender, but who sees her simply as a fellow human being. Here is Jesus who sees somehow the peculiarities of her personal situation, yet does not condemn her. Here is Jesus who offers her a mysterious gift, not of water for the body but “living water” for the soul.

Put the term “living water” into Google (admittedly an option not available to a 1st century Samaritan woman) and you get almost a million hits. But they divide into 3 categories:

1. Literal living water: adverts for water coolers etc ...a nice reflection of how the Samaritan woman at first interpreted literally the words of Jesus as referring to pure running stream water rather than stagnant cistern water.
2. Charities dedicated to providing pure drinking water to the developing world, or social enterprises re-investing their profits to empower women who are victims of domestic violence...water which can turn round troubled lives, outcast lives like the Samaritan woman's, both physically and spiritually.
3. Churches named after Jesus the 'living water': churches publicly committed in their very name to inspiring and equipping Christian disciples to continue Christ's work in quenching the spiritual thirst of the world in its search for eternal meaning...and shouldn't we all be doing that?

The Jewish Rabbis (and the Samaritan woman would have known this) often spoke of the *thirst* of the soul for God, and of quenching that thirst with *living water*, the living water which is the gift of God. So Jesus was not using an abstruse or unusual term.

But what *was* unusual was his use of the term in relation to himself: his promise that *he* is the one who can offer the living water to quench that spiritual thirst forever. This is a Messianic declaration. This is Jesus saying **I** am the One, the one chosen by God, the one destined to usher in a New Age, A New Life, a New Beginning. And that new beginning is offered to *all*.

The really powerful dimension of this story is the *inclusiveness* that lies at its heart. Repeatedly we are told that the New Age ushered in by Jesus breaks down barriers. No longer are there Jews and Samaritans, Chosen People and Gentile heathen, insiders and outsiders, males and females, heterosexuals and homosexuals, upright citizens and immigrant scroungers, bona fide asylum seekers and those dehumanised by the "beyond awful" term "migrant invaders": *there are only fellow human beings, all to be seen equally as the Children of God.*

Here is the Son of God, in all his humanity, tired, weary, and thirsty, sitting at a well.

Here is the holiest of men, listening, not judging, but hearing with understanding and sympathy the sorry story of an outcast loose-living woman.

Here is Jesus breaking through the barriers of nationality and fundamentalist orthodoxy.

Here is the beginning of the declaration of the universality of the gospel: a gospel for the whole world, whatever its faults and its fault-lines.

Here is God so loving the world, being demonstrated not in abstruse theory but in practical action.

Here is the Son of God, who calls us to "*Go and do likewise*".

**The Revd Dr Alan Flintham
Cathedral Chaplain**