

March 15th St Mary; John 4, Romans 5

Where do you get that living water?

Like you, I have been listening to the news, trying not to touch my face and washing my hands a lot. However, I have also been thinking about our passage today, and noticed how modern it is! This story today of the Samaritan woman at the well addresses some current issues!

First, we have a woman who is self-isolating. Who knows why? We are not told. Then she has a conversation with Jesus about drinking from the same/ common cup. Again, we don't know their decision, but they did not have archbishops telling them what to do. Then we have the disciples wondering where Jesus was getting food. If you have been into a shop recently and seen the empty shelves which are usually filled with pasta and rice, you might ask the same question.

Lastly, like many of us, this woman has something to hide. It's a very modern story.

A few weeks ago, I was talking to a friend – she is a Sikh who was born and bred in Birmingham, but whose parents are from India. She has always been happy here, and still is. One summer, she and her husband went to India to work in a temple for a while. She said that returning to Birmingham airport was a shock. For the first time, she realised that her skin made her stand out. We cannot hide our race and gender. One glance at me, and you know mine. But there is a lot that we can hide. We might hide our family, our sexuality, our politics or financial situation. We might hide an addiction, or our religion. The Samaritan woman knew that she might be criticised for being a Samaritan – or worse, being a woman! She could not hide those, but she wanted to hide her marriages, her pain, her longing. She wanted to hide her thirst for acceptance and love.

We all get thirsty. Think about your favourite drink: coffee with cream herbal tea, beer, whisky (for those from Scotland), or just a glass of cool water. Our bodies are designed to need regular watering. Our souls also get thirsty. We long to be loved and accepted, or be valued and respected, or to achieve something worthwhile. We are made to have these thirsts too.

Jesus gently nudges this woman to admit her thirst. He respects her, and he asks her for help. Think about it. Very few people are given the opportunity to help Jesus, usually they ask Jesus to help them, but this

woman was allowed to help Jesus, He asks for a drink and they have a conversation. And the woman asks today's question: 'Where do you get that living water?'

Living water describes water that is flowing – not stuck at the bottom of a well. It is always fresh, always refreshing; it never dries up. It is water that brings life.

At the moment, the world is an uncertain place. We wait for the virus to spread, the invisible enemy. It is an anxious time. We may be thirsty for certainty – which we cannot have; or thirsty to protect our families – which we cannot do; or just thirsty for someone to hear our fears. Where can we find living water to quench our thirst?

Even before the woman asked, Jesus had answered. He said, 'If you knew the gift of God and the one who is speaking to you, he can give you living water.' In other words, knowing Jesus is the way to living water. Jesus knew about her marriages and her loneliness. They were not hidden from him, and he accepted her and loved her. Jesus knows about those things we try to keep hidden, he knows our thirst and he offers us living water.

That's a nice image, but what does it mean in practice? For that, we can turn to Romans.

The letter to the Romans is clear: if we have faith in Jesus, if we know him, we have peace with God through Jesus. We are accepted and don't need to hide. The living water begins to flow.

A Christian friend said to me recently that, when he looked at his friends who had stopped being Christians, it was usually because they had done something that they felt God could not forgive. But if we have faith in Jesus, we have peace with God. Nothing is unforgiveable; nothing needs to be hidden.

The passage continues: we can encourage the flow of living water, by remembering that suffering produces perseverance, perseverance character and character hope.

I have grown up in the era of the Star Wars films – all nine of them plus spin-offs. In one of the earlier films, Yoda – a wise being, says:

'Fear is a path to the dark side.

Fear leads to anger, anger leads to hate, hate leads to suffering.'

We see those steps spiralling downwards in people around us, and sometimes in ourselves. Maybe the Samaritan woman had known them. But those steps ignore Jesus. With Jesus, the steps are different. Maybe we should re-write Yoda's statement:

fear makes us seek the God who cares;
anger lets us know a God of justice;
hate confronts us with a God who loves;
suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character and character
hope; and hope does not disappoint us because God's Holy Spirit has been
poured into our hearts. (Romans 5v3-5)

We are living in anxious times, but I want to finish with two comments.

First - there are practical things we can do to help ourselves, but let's allow the living water to flow through us to others. I would say that we need to keep an eye on others, but I know the care in this congregation - you will do that anyway! However, foodbanks are short of rice, pasta, long-life milk. These are the same things that people have been panic-buying. If we have more than we need, maybe we can contribute something to a local foodbank.

Second, I want to finish with a psalm that I go back to in crisis. Psalm 46: (A fairly free translation!)

God is our refuge and strength, a very-present help in trouble.

Therefore we can have courage though the virus draws near,

Though the stockmarkets tumble, and shop shelves are empty, though large gatherings are banned and handshakes are forbidden.

There is a river of water whose streams make glad the city of God; the holy habitation of the Most High.

God is with his people, therefore they have hope.

The invisible God is greater than the invisible virus. We can live with trust.

God says, 'Be still and know that I am God! I will be exalted in the nations; I will be exalted in the earth'.

The Lord of hosts is with us, the God of Jacob is our fortress.

The question today 'Where do you get that living water?'

Jesus answer - 'If you knew the gift of God and the one who is speaking to you, he can give you living water.'