

Lent 3 2017 - John 4:5-26

The woman said to him, 'Sir, give me this water so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water.'

May the words on my lips and the thoughts of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Strength and our Redeemer.

Scripture is an amazing thing; it can be read on so many different levels, using many different approaches, and thus can have endless possible meanings. That is part of its nature and richness. We can approach it with the eyes of a **historian**, or a **literary critic**, a theologian, pastor, **missioner** - or just **personally**, asking the **Spirit** to guide our reflection and speak directly to us.

And engagement with Scripture is **not a one-way street**, down which the word of God simply travels to us. There is **two-way traffic**, because we bring **ourselves** and **our context** to Scripture as we read it. That can have a profound effect on how we hear it in any one particular time or place.

So this morning I would like to engage with our Gospel passage in a way that draws on a few of these approaches: the **literary**, **missional** and **spiritual**. That might sound complicated, but I hope it will add up to *one simple message* as we hear this passage **today in our world**.

We really only need to listen carefully to John's gospel to be aware of what the **literary critic** tells; John loves to use **irony** and **misunderstanding** to make his point. Nowhere is that more

plain than in the story of the Samaritan woman at the well. She completely **misunderstands** the distinction between the water in the well and the living water of which Jesus is speaking. John plays this up at length so that we, his hearers might understand the distinction. And then there's the **irony** of trying to gather living water in a bucket. You can't gather or **distribute living water with a bucket - or can you?** Let's come back to that.

The Samaritan woman is of course one of the **excluded** in the world of the Jews. Jesus, like anyone else, operates within the world into which he was born. There is always **two-way traffic** between a person and their cultural context. He reacts as a **prophet**, standing up against the *status quo* and overriding the customs of his time, and is recognised as such by the Samaritan woman. But his action is more than prophetic.

He makes the first move. He **takes the initial step**, reaching out to someone who is excluded in his cultural context. She is a **marginalised woman** and only by virtue of her gender and race, which is not her fault and which she can do nothing to change. Such action today, in our contemporary church parlance, would be described, not so much as prophetic, as **missional**.

There follows discussion between Jesus and the Samaritan woman about **where**, (and I think today we might add **how**) one should worship. The woman asks whether it should be on this mountain or that place Jerusalem. And Jesus' response is that it is in neither of these places. What is important is that we should worship the Father **in spirit and in truth**.

To my mind, worship also includes how we **respond to Scripture**. As followers of Christ, we are summoned to hear it, proclaim it, and respond to it afresh in each generation; that is in our time and place. Much of that response will be **guided by the Spirit**, if we will just let him in as we listen, and if we will allow two-way traffic along the street of our engagement with Scripture.

I suspect that many of us here this morning will still have in our minds images from our TV screens this last week. These have included disturbing pictures of the **impending famine** in Nigeria, Somalia and other countries. You may have seen that amazing clip of a little boy, brought into hospital unconscious and near to death. It took only a few moments on a drip of vital body salts and a sip or two of water to bring him back to consciousness. For him, **physical water** was the **water of life itself**.

Those pictures should affect how we hear our Gospel reading this morning. They are not something to be bracketed out, but can show us how we might respond to this scripture **today** in a way that is Spirit led and faithful, as we try to follow our Lord, the greatest missionary of all time, as he reached out to the marginalised and oppressed, offering them *living water*.

John is of course using the **literary** devices of **irony** and **misunderstanding** to draw a **distinction** between *living water that gushes up to eternal life* and *physical water* that can be drawn from a well by means of a bucket. However, as we hear this particular reading at this particular time, it seems to me legitimate to **bring together the literal and theological understandings of living water**. This would not, in this instance, be a

misunderstanding of the passage or of the nature of living water, I believe.

To respond to physical suffering in our fellow human beings is *one simple message* given by Jesus that is also life-giving for us. It is the bread and butter of Christian living. For that little boy near to death, administration of physical water was life-giving. By giving a **bucket** or a pump **we can disseminate the water of life** to others. We should be clear that in so responding we are **missioners**, proclaiming our Lord as the **Living Water** that quenches every thirst because we reach out to others following his example and in his name.

You will find in your order of service an envelope provided by Christian Aid requesting a donation to their current Emergency Appeal. On it is another quotation from John: *Let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth*. Here is a particular opportunity for us today to worship the Father through the Son **in spirit and in truth**.