

## All Saints King's Heath – 15 March 2020 (Third Sunday of Lent)

(Exodus 17:1-7; John 4:5-42)

The Word of life; the bread of life; the water of life; the light of the world; the resurrection and the life - the great themes in St John's retelling of the Gospel story. This week he has given us the water of life, in his story of Jesus with the Samaritan woman at the well.

But we'll start with our first reading, our Old Testament reading, which came from the book Exodus. It's called Exodus because it tells the story of the escape, or exodus, of the people of Israel from their captivity in the land of Egypt. Every year, at the feast of Passover, Jewish people tell this story to each other to remind one another who they are and where they came from – just as, when Holy Week and Easter come, we read the story of how Jesus passed over through death to resurrection, in order to remind ourselves who we are as where we come from.

You'll remember the Exodus story. Moses has had his trial of strength with Pharaoh – the plagues of Egypt, frogs, flies, hail, and all the rest of them. The people of Israel have escaped from slavery and Moses has led them through their first great ordeal – the waters of the Red Sea. With his staff Moses has parted the waters and the people have walked through the sea dry shod. But when Pharaoh tried to pursue them, the waters returned, and his army was drowned. Moses sings his song of triumph:

I will sing unto the LORD, for he has triumphed gloriously;  
the horse and his rider he has thrown into the sea.

But after the triumph, there is the let-down. The trek through wilderness of Sinai lies in front of them. As it turned out, it took them forty years to reach their Promised Land. It's a bit like the morning after an election. First there is the triumph of election night – champagne and elation. But then comes the cold light of morning, and the prospect of actually having to govern the country. The long slog lies ahead.

So the people start to mutter and complain. First of all they complain of hunger. They forget the miseries of slavery. “If only we had died by the hand of the LORD in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread.”

God has pity on them and gives them bread from heaven – the manna that they will receive every day until they have crossed the Jordan and entered the Promised Land.

But then they complain again – this time because they are thirsty. (That is where we came into the story this morning.) They say to Moses: “Why did you bring us out of Egypt to kill us and our children and our livestock with thirst?” In response, God tells Moses to go ahead of the people. “I will be standing there in front of you on the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will flow out of it, so that the people may drink.” Moses strikes the rock with his staff and the water flows, not like the water they had known irrigating the green and fertile fields of Egypt, but water in the barren wilderness, gushing out of hard rock.

Moses (it says) “called the place Massah and Meribah, because the Israelites quarrelled and tested the Lord, saying, ‘Is the LORD among us or not?’”

And that is our question too. Is God only with us in our day of triumph and exultation, when all is going well? Or is God with us also in the barren wilderness, in the day of desolation? The bible story is clear. God had been with them in victory over Pharaoh and his army. And God is with them still in the hunger and thirst of the desert.

St John’s Gospel picks up both of these stories – the manna and the water. In chapter 6 of his Gospel he tells us how the people said to Jesus: “Moses gave our fathers manna in the wilderness. What have you got to offer?” Jesus replies (and notice the tenses): “It was not Moses who **gave** you bread from heaven, but it is my Father who **gives** you the true bread from heaven... This is the bread that has come down from heaven, not like the bread that your fathers ate, and they died. But the one who eats this bread will live for ever... The bread that I will give is my flesh, given for the life of the world.”

Today's Gospel gives us the same contrast. The Samaritan woman says to Jesus: "Are you greater than our father Jacob, who gave us this well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?" Jesus replies: "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again. But whoever drinks of the water that I will give will never thirst again."

And then comes some astonishing words. Yes, the water is a gift from Jesus, just like the bread of life. But where shall we find it? This is what he says. "Whoever drinks of the water that I will give will never thirst again. But the water that I shall give will become in you a spring of water gushing up to eternal life."

Moses struck the stony rock, and water gushed out – water for the body. Jesus strikes our hearts of stone, and the water of life gushes out – water for the soul. God was with his people in their wilderness. The Son of God is with us in our wilderness, in our darkest, stoniest places. And the water that he gives will well up within us – this water that will never fail.

The Lord is with **us**, whether we sense his presence or not, as surely as he was with that Samaritan woman in all her stubborn confusion. It takes her time to recognise who it is who is with her. As Jesus shines the light of his truth on to her, she tries to keep him at a distance, she keeps changing the subject. But he gets through to her in the end, to the point where she goes back to her village to tell the people there that she has met the Messiah. And she does it with such conviction that they believe her.

Just as it was in the desert, so now. The water springs up in the driest, stoniest place. There is another text in John's Gospel that tells us something more. Here Jesus is teaching in the temple, and he cries out: "Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink. As the scripture has said, 'Out of the believer's heart shall flow rivers of living water'." Then the Gospel writer comments: "Now Jesus said this about the Spirit, which believers in him were to receive."

And this is part of what St Paul was saying in this morning's second reading. In the midst of our sufferings we have hope, "because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us."

The water of life, which is the life –giving Spirit of the love of God, wells up in those who come to Jesus, and so we have hope.

When I was writing these words, I thought of the last conversation I had with our beloved sister Vicki just before her baptism a few weeks ago. I said to her, “Vicki, remember what it’s all about: God loves you.” And she replied, “And I love him too.” The Spirit of the love of God was poured out in her heart.

And that in turn reminded me of a line in George Herbert’s poem about prayer. Prayer, he says, is “God’s breath in man returning to his birth”. And, at the end of the poem:

Church-bells beyond the stars heard, the soul’s blood,  
The land of spices; something understood.

Vicki understood. She loved God, and her love for God was God’s own breath in her returning to the one who gave it. Her prayer, her love for God, was her soul’s blood.

And so I thought also some lines by another poet, W.H.Auden, which are printed in today’s pew sheet.

In the desert of the heart  
Let the healing fountain start.  
In the prison of his days  
Teach the free man how to praise.

“In the prison of his days/ teach the free man how to praise.” Love turns to praise, even in affliction. That is the story of Maximilian Kolbe, a Polish priest who was imprisoned by the Nazis in Auschwitz. He was put in a punishment cell to die of hunger and thirst in the heat of August. What did he do in his cell? He sang hymns of praise for all to hear. The prison authorities couldn’t stand it, so they injected him with poison to silence his prayers and his singing.

It’s all there in the words of Psalm 23:

Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil:  
for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff comfort me.

The Lord is with us, beside us and within us, and the fountain of his Spirit can well up in the stoniest places. This can be as true of a church community as it of particular Christian people. The Church in this country and in the whole of Western Europe is in numerical decline. We are living in a spiritual desert, in a godless society, where it is taken for granted that there is no God. And yet, for those with eyes to see there are springs of water in this wilderness.

A fortnight ago I was with one of my daughters and her husband in their local church in Tower Hamlets. The sort of place that a managerial mentality would close down as an unviable unit. Twenty-five or thirty people in church, but of an astonishing variety from all over the world, many, if not most, of them battered by life, by the Department of Work and Pensions, and by the Home Office. A smattering of middle class people like my daughter and her husband. But also plenty of life's casualties, including a young man with severe learning difficulties shouting his head off from time to time. A struggling church, you would say, not like the church plant less than a mile away that heaves with a congregation of hundreds.

I'm sure the Spirit is at work, in perhaps more obvious ways, in the church plant. But the Spirit of God's love was also welling up to eternal life in that battered little congregation. I have to say that I was happier and more at home there than I would have been in the well-endowed and well-oiled splendours of, say, Westminster Abbey.

When we get to the offertory, we'll be singing one of Charles Wesley's great hymns, "Jesu, lover of my soul." When we reach the last few lines, you'll see why I asked for it this morning:

Thou of life the fountain art:  
    Freely let me take of thee,  
Spring thou up within my heart,  
    Rise to all eternity.