

The gift of living water
Exodus 17:1-7; Romans 5:1-11; John 4:5-42

Lent 3A (8 March) 2026
Waiapu Cathedral

We all need water. We can't live without it. Indeed we die much sooner from thirst than we do from a lack of food. Without water, life can't be sustained. We know this. The Israelites in the wilderness knew this. They were journeying from place to place, on their way to a new life – but mentally, they were having trouble adjusting. They camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink. So they complained to Moses, "Give us water to drink!" God had led the Israelites to safety through the Red Sea, had provided manna for nourishment, but they were still focused inwards, still acting like slaves, arguing and complaining and wanting to go back to Egypt. It wasn't wrong for the Israelites to be thirsty – it was the desert after all – but Moses and God saw this more as an issue of trust. The words of the Israelites said "We're thirsty" but their hearts said "Is God really here?" "Is the Lord among us or not?"

It's a failure of nerve, a lack of trust: doubting that God was with them, doubting that God cared for them. And I don't know about you, but I've been there too. Doubting that God is with me in a difficult situation, feeling unseen and uncared for by God. Moses saw the Israelites' words as an attempt to test God, an attempt to force God to do something, to act on their behalf, to prove that God cared for them. Yet, even there, God provided for them, giving them streams of water from the rock, life-giving water in the desert. There's resonance there with Paul's "even while we were still sinners, Christ died for us." Even though the Israelites were quarrelling and complaining, God still acted to give them life. That water is a symbol for the life that God, the fountain of life, is forever wanting to give us.

The Samaritan woman at the well came to know this. Both stories feature thirst and divine presence in unexpected places, both involve people asking for water, and reveal God's surprising generosity. The woman's encounter with Jesus was unusual, unlikely. It's the middle of the day, and it's hot, and this time Jesus is the one who is thirsty – so he asks for a drink. Here was Jesus in a foreign region, Samaria, face to face with a local woman at Jacob's well. In the normal course of events they would not have – should not have – been speaking together. A Jewish man and a Samaritan woman, religious enemies, two strangers of the opposite sex, alone together.

Let's not, incidentally, get sidetracked by the comment about the woman having had five husbands and now living with someone who is not her husband. Even if it really happened like that it's more a series of tragedies, not immoral conduct, that led to her situation (for a start, women couldn't initiate divorce back then, and with no social safety net a woman alone would've needed to find a male protector somehow). But it's more likely to be one of the Fourth Gospel's metaphors: the Samaritans were historically associated with five idolatrous people-groups settled by the Assyrians in the land of Israel during the Exile. [2 Kings 17: 24] It's there to demonstrate the old hostilities between Jews and Samaritans.

Here it's Jesus, by asking for a drink, who crosses the barriers of hostility to meet human need. This is the longest theological conversation Jesus has in the Gospels. The Samaritan woman is a seeker, a theologian, and Jesus meets her in her questions. He wants to satisfy, not just her physical need for water, but her spiritual thirst. He wants to connect her with the life that comes from God. The "living water" he offers her is about abundant, unbounded divine life.

It's the power and truth and energy that bubbles forth from the heart of the God who loves her. He reveals himself to her as the Messiah – the first time he says that to anyone in the Gospel. The Israelites' question, "Is the Lord among us or not?" is answered in an embodied way by Jesus: yes, God is among you, talking with you, asking for a drink.

The woman came to realise Jesus saw her, knew her, and loved her. Divine knowledge is the sort of recognition that restores – he saw her and gave her living water to drink. The thing Paul was helping the Christians in Rome come to realise was that God knew them and loved them and Christ died for them, even while they were sinners. They didn't need to be righteous for God to love them – that was one of Paul's great messages. The Israelites quarrelling and complaining their way across the desert didn't need to be righteous for God to love them and give them the water which kept them alive. And we don't need to be righteous either – we can't make God love us more (or love us less) by what we do.

That same water of life is available to us too. The Israelites' story is very much like our own: Is the Lord among us or not? When things get tough, do we trust that God is with us? Jesus came to say – to us, as to the Samaritan woman at the well – yes, God is with us. God offers to us the same thing the Israelites were offered, the same thing Paul's audience in Rome was offered, the same thing the woman was offered: life, with love, reconciliation, and energy thrown in alongside.

Because of that encounter with Jesus, the woman at the well came alive. She left her water jar and rushed back into the city, going to share her experiences, her good news, with the rest of her community. Because of that meeting, the rest of that Samaritan village came to drink of the living water also. The woman at the well becomes an evangelist, she shares her story – and others are blessed through her. She's the first person in John to bring an entire community to faith. Her story speaks – as Paul's letter also speaks – of the possibility of reconciliation between old enemies: between Jews and Samaritans, between humanity and God.

Is the Lord among us or not? Yes, God is among us: meeting us in the desert, at the well, in our weakness, and here in this Eucharist. Jesus asked the Samaritan woman for water and became the giver of living water, to her and her community. Living water flows *now*, in this season of Lent. In the Eucharist we are offered the gifts of reconciliation and new life, Christ's presence and the grace of new energy and new possibilities. As we go away from here may we be like that woman, heading off to share our stories, our encounters with Jesus, so that others may also be blessed with living water.

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