

Before I ever saw it I had naively assumed that the River Jordan was substantial. It is now, for most of its length, but a stream, and in summer, in places almost totally dried up. The Dead Sea into which it flows is now split in two, there being insufficient water to sustain a single lake. Ecologically disastrous, it is of course also a politically inflammable situation. I'm involved in a trust which supports schools in Palestine and one of the orphanages we support receives running water only once a week. The Orphanage is about a kilometre away from an Israeli settlement where sprinklers play over the grass. Of course, particularly in arid countries water is always a crucial commodity. Indeed, despite the precipitation of this last week,

with climate change, it may become a commodity in short supply here too.

Today's Gospel reading is focussed on water supply- ostensibly at least. It takes place at Jacob's Well, sacred to the Samaritans- and remember the Samaritans were sort of estranged first cousins of Jesus. They shared much, in custom and religion with their Jewish neighbours, but also had striking differences in interpretation and practice which rendered them prickly towards each other. Of course, this story is not just about water but 'living water'- in Hebrew mayim chayim, itself a bubbly sound. – it means fresh water, running water, not something that's been left sitting around in jars for a few days. Living Water, John tells us in his Gospel,

is code for the presence of the Holy Spirit. But the idea of that bubbly, onomatopoeic 'mayim chayim' as water for life, runs its course throughout the Hebrew scriptures too.

The Samaritan woman, clearly appreciates the value of water somewhat more than us . She would never have left the tap running while she brushed her teeth. She is entranced by the prospect of an unfailing supply- imagine how much time and effort she might save if she no longer had to trip to the well several times a day. And the story begins with this chatty, almost flirtatious conversation about living water-' show us your bucket, she implies'. She knew that if the presence of living water spells life, then its absence spells death- death to some two million children in 2023 alone in the developing

world through bacterial diarrhoea. The Samaritan woman, and those two million mothers, know the true value of living water. But it doesn't end there, for living water to quench thirst, through this dialogue, morphs into living water to for deeper living.

John, in his masterly storytelling, through question and answer, digs deeper and deeper, exploring the woman's faith, her relationships, her status, her truthfulness and integrity, as we might say her wellbeing. Through this digging deep into the life of this Samaritan woman, questions are asked striking the bedrock of her existence, who is she? And who is he, this stranger? Stunned and entranced in equal measure she runs off to town to tell her neighbours and John asserts that many are brought to see God

at work in this man, to see him as the Anointed One, the Messiah for which they longed, because of the engagement with this foreign woman. Is John's Gospel here pushing the place of women's ministry, is it suggesting an inclusivity many of his hearers would have found hard to accept? Who knows.

But certainly having the story of the fractious Israelites in the wilderness moaning about being thirsty after they had received their food, alongside this living water, brings the reaction of Jesus' hearers into focus. This juxtaposition of the two stories is not a rejection of Judaism or the Hebrew Scripture, no, it is rather a means of making the far more fundamental and universal point that God does not work on the basis of obedience and reward, that leads us only to the heresy of the

Prosperity Gospel. No, the placing of these two stores in parallel, is explained by the third panel in today's scriptural tryptych- Paul, admittedly in a somewhat convoluted argument, makes the point that God's love for all is there, not because we deserve it (or that others don't) but because that is the nature of God. We don't have to deserve it, but we do need to open our eyes to see it and learn to accept it.

Strangely we don't know if the Samaritan woman did? John never tells us. Did she find the living water, the water for living in fullness of life, or did she moan about being thirsty and her trips to the well. Are we prepared to lift our eyes, open our ears to find spores, fragments, hints of that unending

love of God in our lives and our common living, to acknowledge and develop them, or would we rather prefer to moan of our thirst. Perhaps this Lent it's time to dare an answer.

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