

## “Living Water”

A sermon preached by the Revd Canon John Barr in Great Malvern Priory

Bible Readings: Exodus 7. 1 - 7                      John 4. 5 - 42

3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Lent                      19 March 2017                      10.30 am Parish Communion

*Father, by the wellspring of Your Spirit, may these spoken words be faithful to Your written word, and so lead us to Your living Word, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*

“Living water” (John 4. 10, 11). In the world of the Samaritan woman in today's Gospel, “living water” was understood to be what we might now call “running water.” Water that is flowing, rather than stagnant. Water that cleanses, refreshes, and renews. Water that is life-giving, and life sustaining. Water that was - and is - a very precious resource. Many in our world today - around 1 billion - lack access to such “living water” - either because of drought due to lack of rain - as in the famine affected areas of East Africa - or else because of water pollution. Biologically, we know that water is essential to life. Water is the major component of our bodies. It is in our food, and in our breath. Without water, life would simply be impossible.

Yet it is easy for us to take water for granted. Here in Malvern, we live in a place that is famous for its “living water”. The numerous springs, which bubble up through the ancient Malvern Hills, have a purity that has long made them sought after for health and healing. They have encouraged and enabled people to live near them, and they continue to offer their precious gift to us. Each year, as part of the Malvern Well Dressing Festival organised by the Malvern Spa Association, people gather at the springs, spouts, fountains and wells of the Malvern Hills - 46 in all - to give thanks for, and to bless the spring water. Last year at the end of April, I was asked to bless the water pouring from the Malvinha spout up by Belle Vue Terrace. Just before I prayed, I quoted some verses from Psalm 36, verses which inspired the design of the two Tom Denny windows in the North Aisle: “Your steadfast love, O Lord, extends to the heavens, Your faithfulness to the clouds. Your righteousness is like the mighty mountains, Your judgements are like the great deep; You save both humans and animals alike, O Lord. How precious is Your steadfast love, O God! All people may take refuge in the shadow of Your wings. They feast on the abundance of Your house, and You give them drink from the river of Your delights. For with You is the well of life; in Your light we see light” (Psalm 36. 5 – 9).

“With You is the well of life” (Psalm 36. 9). Those words from Psalm 36 speak of another type of “living water” - the same gift of “living water” that Jesus was offering to give to the Samaritan woman. Jesus was not referring to physical water, but to something quite different. “Those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life” (John 4. 14). Later in John's Gospel – in chapter 7 – it is made clear that Jesus was, in fact, referring to the gift of the Holy Spirit.

The encounter between Jesus and the Samaritan woman by Jacob's well has echoes of another meeting by a well that took place many centuries before. This meeting was between Abraham's servant and Rebekah in Genesis chapter 24. It was an encounter which led to Rebekah becoming Isaac's wife, and subsequently the mother of Jacob - the same Jacob whose well was the meeting place in today's Gospel account. When Jesus met the Samaritan woman as He sat there by the well, and then asked her for a drink, He initiated a boundary breaking conversation. Not only was Jesus speaking to a woman in a public place, but He was also associating with a Samaritan, someone of mixed ancestry who the Jews would normally shun. And, as if that was not already bad enough, Jesus was also mixing with someone of dubious character. Why? Because the normal time for women to visit the well would have been at the cooler part of the

day - early morning or late afternoon - and so this woman was there at a time when she would be least likely to meet anyone who knew her.

While Jesus was aware of how it might appear if a devout Jew was alone with a Samaritan woman, yet He still chose to initiate a conversation with her. Knowing what He did, Jesus might so easily have done what others did, and written her off as a lost cause - someone who was beyond help, not worth bothering with. But as far as Jesus was concerned, this messed up person was not unredeemable. He looked beyond her sin-spoiled history and into her longing heart, beyond her mistakes and into her desire for true love - the yearning for true love that only God can satisfy.

At first - as often happens in John's Gospel - there was an initial misunderstanding. The Samaritan woman assumed that Jesus was talking about "living water" at a physical level, the spring of water at the bottom of Jacob's well - water to quench the thirst, like the water the people of Israel thirsted for in today's first reading from Exodus. Yet the "living water" that Jesus offered the Samaritan woman at their encounter by the well was something quite different from this, something for which water is a physical symbol, or sacrament. Jesus was offering her nothing less than a new life, an opportunity to start again. "The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life" (John 4. 14). A spring of living water. One whose wellspring does not run dry. For Jesus was offering her nothing less than new life, transformed life, the life of God's new creation. An offer that was and is made to one and all - regardless of gender or geography, race or reputation.

The response of the Samaritan woman to Jesus' offer of "living water" was the start of a journey of faith. In his commentary *John for Everyone*, Tom Wright puts it like this: "She doesn't know exactly what he's talking about, but she wants to know more. What other meanings she was thinking of, we cannot now fathom. But she's in for a shock - as is everyone who starts to take Jesus seriously. He has living water to offer all right, but when you start to drink it, it will change every area of your life" (p 42, 43).

"Those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life" (John 4. 14). This was the promise Jesus made to the Samaritan woman by Jacob's well, a life-changing offer that invited her response - "Sir, give me this water so that I may never be thirsty" (John 4. 15). And that promise, that offer of Jesus, continues to be made by the Lord to all who know their spiritual weariness and thirst. For God's gift of "living water" - "the well of life" - is still freely available to those who long to receive it.

What about you and me? Deep down in the well of our heart, how thirsty are you and I for that "living water", that new life, which Jesus offers us? This morning, as we come to receive the sacrament of Holy Communion with open hands and lips, how open are we to allow the "living water" of Jesus Christ - His Spirit - to change us from inside out? And, through us, to refresh others with the good news of Jesus, the Saviour of the world?

To a spiritually thirsty world, the Living Lord Jesus offers His gift of "living water." And the Lord Himself thirsts for our response here today, just as surely as He once thirsted for the response of a Samaritan woman by Jacob's well.

*John Barr*