

John 4

Lord, I believe; help thou my unbelief

It's the height of the blazing noon-day sun, the time when only mad-dogs and English-men are about. Everyone else is still inside or in the shade at this time of the day – it's just too hot.

But not you, you're about to go out; you can be on your own. No one needs to see you draw the water you need to get you through the rest of the day; no one needs to be reminded of your shame; no one needs to see your eyes filled with the bitter saltiness of tears. So despite the aching heat, despite the scorching dust, despite the sharp, piercing brightness of the light, you leave your house furtively looking for those inevitable eyes watching and judging every move, and head out to the well.

Just to be sure though, to be safe, it's best to avoid the wells and water sources nearer the village. It's pretty unlikely that there would be someone there at this ungodly hour of the day, but you never know – believe me, you've seen stranger things in your time! Better safe than sorry. So instead, hopefully unseen, you slip out of the village and head out into the even hotter desert sands, to the well where Jacob settled all that time ago.

Perhaps as you trudge there, contemplating the way the inevitable weight of the water on your return will add to the already heavy burden of life you have on your shoulders; you think back to the times when you wouldn't need to do this, when you didn't feel you had to go this extra distance in the heat of the day; the times when you would just join the other women in the cool of the evening, gathering round the village watering hole, laughing, chatting, singing songs, sharing stories; perhaps even having some fun gossiping about 'Her', 'you know who' - the same type of person you've now found you've turned into.

What were you doing? Were you looking ahead to the blur of the well in the distance and watching it gradually come into focus? Or were you watching your feet as you walked, as if to avoid any suggestion of thought about what the future was to bring? At what point did you realise you weren't going to be on your own at the well? A man (and we all know what that means); a traveller, baked in the dust of the road; exhausted (he must have been to have stopped here at this time of the day); and a Jew at that – you know what they think of us Samaritans.....

A Samaritan, a woman, and one out at this time of the day (he'll know full well what that says about you!) – that's three things he's going to have against you from the start! What do you do? You could always wait until he's left – but there's no obvious sign of that happening soon; Perhaps think of turning back? But you need the water, it's hard enough as it is without water; Maybe, just maybe - He looks tired – perhaps you can sneak in and he'll be too exhausted to notice....

So did you edge forwards, apprehensive, perhaps, waiting, just waiting for the yelling and condemnation, the tutting you hear echo around you all the time; or perhaps this time it will be the other response – the one you only get from men - the swagger, the lewd suggestive comment, the crude demand for something you don't necessarily want to give?

And then, was there a noise? a drawing of breath? perhaps you could just somehow feel him prepare to speak. Did you tense up, ready for the inevitable comment?? Your head slumping into your shoulders ready for what was to come?? But

“Give me a drink”

“Give me a drink” – quite a simple start to a conversation that's going to change lives isn't it? Yet it does – and not only the life of this one Samaritan woman, but that of her whole village and community too. I don't know about you, but I have a tendency to look at the stories of Jesus and the disciples, or even of later

missionaries bringing the gospel to far flung corners of the known world and think “I can’t do that”; “that’s far too complex and difficult, I wouldn’t stand a chance of doing something similar”. But something simple, like just asking for a drink of water? – even I could manage that!!

I’m sure many of you are by now aware of the plan in the Diocese to encourage people to talk about their faith to others – friends, family, colleagues, at school – and invite them to church to a discipleship course or event. As churches we’re being invited to organise courses – Alpha, the Table Talk resources we’re using here at St Peter’s, and a number of others – designed to help people explore our Christian faith. We need to be doing this – we are after all commanded to ‘go and make disciples of all nations’ and you don’t need me to reel out a load of statistics to realise that we can no longer rely on some form of cultural or institutional ‘understanding’ of Christianity – for better or worse we’re now in a post-Christian society. We need to be reminding ourselves, and teaching others, what our faith is and is about.

But these things don’t start with the courses on offer – they start with those small moments round the well – moments that may seem insignificant; moments perhaps where (Just like Jesus in this passage) we may be feeling exhausted. How often instead though do we (how often do I) just avoid asking the question?

“Give me a drink” – but it’s more than that, it’s a question that breaks barriers – social, cultural, political. We’re talking here about a woman – Jesus was a rabbi, at that time he should have wanted nothing to do with her (and we see some of that in the later response of the disciples); she was a Samaritan – the Jewish culture at that time would have seen them as the lowest of the low; and, we find out, she’s someone with a slightly chequered past. Jesus should have had nothing whatsoever to do with her! As someone considered a Gentile, he shouldn’t have shared food or drink with them, and as a woman he certainly shouldn’t have asked her for water (in fact apparently with the culture at the time the husband would have given a drink to his wife – the gender roles are being flipped here).

Actually, the translation we’ve used today does us a slight disservice. In our version it’s slightly ambiguous, “give me a drink” sounds a bit like a command. If you’ll forgive me for getting technical, the Greek aorist-imperative used in the original text – *dos moi pein* (apologies for the pronunciation – that’s Greek via Glasgow) – should in English probably take more of a question-and-please form. ‘please could you give me a drink of water?’.

When we ask a question like that we’re momentarily placing ourselves beneath that of the person we’re asking. Jesus is taking himself right down to the level of the woman. How often do we do that?

In our reading last week we heard of Nicodemus – a man with all the markings of power and authority – a teacher, an Israelite, a man – sneaking in to see Jesus in the middle of the night then sneaking out again, with what impact? Today’s reading we see Jesus making the first move and approaching, in the stark light of day, someone who would have been seen in society as being the lowest of the low – and what a different response!

I have to ask myself – how much do I prefer to be seen next to the Nicodemus’s of this world rather than today’s Samaritan women???

“Give me a drink” – she comes to the well needing water, she leaves having received a different water – the living water offered by Christ. This woman who, as we have seen is a minority three times over. This woman goes to Jacob’s well and receives something from Christ that not even Jacob himself (you may remember that Jacob is the Grandson of Abraham, the father of all Israel) could provide. If this woman can receive that, then surely I can...

Like our passage from Romans reminds us, the reconciliation and righteousness we have received through the death and resurrection of Christ Jesus is entirely unmerited; there's nothing we can do that deserves it. Instead, Jesus meets us at the well, and offers us the living water of the Holy Spirit.

The question is, what do we do with that? I don't know if you noticed, it was only a passing line, but the Gospel writer deliberately states that the woman leaves her water-jar at the well when she goes to tell the village of her encounter with Christ. She doesn't need it – she's had the Living Water of the Holy Spirit, she has become the 'spring of water gushing up to eternal life' for her village and rushes off to do something about it, to tell other people so that they can receive it too. She's been so transformed by her encounter with Jesus that in the space of one conversation she moves from being the type of person who deliberately goes to the well at the time of day where she doesn't need to meet anyone to someone who virtually goes door to door telling people of her encounter.

Someone once remarked that this passage is the story of a woman who came for water but who went home with the well; later on in this service we'll be coming up to the rail to receive and be renewed by the body and blood of Our Lord Jesus Christ. In what ways, no matter how small and insignificant they may seem, do we allow that renewal to transform into a similar Fountain of Gushing Water in our own homes and communities? In what we say to family, friends, colleagues about our Faith?

"Give me a drink" – so, how do you respond?? What do you do and say??

Let us pray, "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". Almighty Father, through the power of your Holy Spirit, help us to be that spring of water, in our homes, in our community and in our world.

Amen