

## **Sermon 15 March 2020. Sarah Thomas**

### **Exodus 17:1-7 and John 4:5-42**

For those of us who live in cities with utility companies providing us with clean water it can often seem as if our water comes from them, rather than from God.

But those companies only clean and deliver our water. Water itself is a free gift from God.

It can seem at times that there is too much of it, and in the wrong place. Anyone who has been flooded will testify to that. And not only to water being in the wrong place, but to the sheer frightening force of it and the filth that is carried by it into homes and businesses.

Lindsey mentioned this week as, the rain was falling yet again, that it felt almost as if we are living in Dante's third circle of hell, reserved for gluttons (both of food and for experience), who are forced to lie in a vile slush provided by a never ending icy rain.

It can also seem at times that there isn't enough of it. Drought seems to come more easily these days – think back two summers ago here and to the dreadful fires in Australia at the beginning of this year, fuelled by droughts without precedent in 400 years.

Those of us looking at Saying Yes to Life, this year's Lent book were considering on Monday that part in Genesis 1 when God creates water and our response to it. There were many examples of our care for it, these are two of them.

In 2018 Cape Town, a city of 4 million people, learned that it would run out of water in four months. Cape Town is city of huge inequality. Shanty Towns where people live in shacks, depending on communal taps and risk robbery, rape and murder when they use communal toilets at night. Other areas of the city where people have running water and swimming pools. In the time of rationing communal taps ran dry; elderly and disabled people relied on others to collect water for them, as they could not walk to the collection points or carry 25 litre buckets.

The Archbishop of Cape Town, interviewed by Ruth Valerio, the author of the book, speaks of the need to look at the provision of water as an issue of justice and equality. While many people in Africa are worried about losing precious environmental services, there are hundreds of millions who have never yet experienced them, and who live in a permanent state of crisis.

In the USA, Bishop Michael Curry describes how the Anglican church in the US was part of protests to stop the building of the Dakota oil pipeline which would have split the Missouri River and would have put at risk the vital source of water for the Standing Rock Sioux Native American reservation.

Water is life, and we should honour the need of every person and creature for it.

We use it not just to drink, but to clean and to exercise in and it is used in massive quantities in industrial processes.

On a domestic level we can learn to use less of it and to use fewer harmful chemicals as we clean with it, which lessens the risk of pollution of ground and waterways, lakes and rivers.

The Israelites in the wilderness seem to have a deep insecurity that God is not with them. They learn that they can trust in a radical God who is opposed to hoarding and is present and responsive to their needs. In the previous chapter, God has sent manna so that they have something to eat. Warned only to eat enough for the day and not to store it, they start to hoard. The manna goes off. Millenia later, we are still doing similar things. Food bank donations are down as people are panic buying. So those who live from tin to tin are facing renewed

hunger from the activities of those whose cupboards and freezers are probably already fuller than they need. If water became rationed no doubt we would have a similar response.

And that's just the practical, tangible side of water. Water is indeed life; we need it more than we need food.

Water is also life of a different sort. Jesus talks of 'living water', life that is nourished by God.

Tom Wright describes this as a spring bubbling up inside us, refreshing us with the new life which is coming into the world with Jesus.

And later on in John's gospel, Jesus makes it more clear that what he means is that the spring is the Holy Spirit. In order to take Jesus up on his offer of running, pure water, bubbling up inside us, we will have to get rid of the stale, mouldy, stagnant water that we tend to live off. Or maybe let the fresh water flush out the stagnant water.

That was what Jesus was saying to the woman at the well.

He shouldn't have been talking to her at all. Men in that area of Palestine didn't, and still don't, talk to women they don't know, and indeed often don't talk to those they do know. Samaritans and Jewish people had a long running, often dangerous, dispute about their 'shared' faith. John tells us of the route Jesus chose to take to get from Judea to Galilee. Instead of taking the usual long roundabout route to avoid Samaria, he took the direct road, which one usually only took if heavily armed. Jesus took risks. And here he is, a Jewish man talking to a Samaritan woman. And telling her about living water.

He isn't hoarding the good news.

He is sharing it.

In doing so, he elevates the role of women. He tells her to be a witness to what she has heard from him. Women were not accounted to be credible witnesses, and yet the men who came out from the town, heard Jesus and asked to learn more.

He takes the good news to people other than the people of Israel.

He says that there will no longer be any special place to worship God, we can worship in spirit and in truth. Who knows, if this crisis continues, we may be worshipping on a livestream feed. The possibilities for technological chaos abound, or alternatively become a possibility for others who wouldn't dare come across the doorstep, to find us.

The Israelites tested God. Testing which was born of a stressful environment.

We are experiencing an environment that is more stressful than usual. Yet we live in warm homes, with full utilities in a country with a health service.. And we say, how long oh God will this go on. How much more will those who have been flooded, who do not have clean water to drink, who are hungry, how much more will they say – how long oh God

God does come to us, sometimes silently, sometimes through the love and kindness of friends, relatives or strangers. All who have experienced God's kindness are witnesses.

And God meets us in our place of need. For those who are worried, anxious, weighed down under this time of never ending icy rain and fear of illness or isolation, please do consider asking God's holy spirit to bring wholeness, to renew and refresh.

May we learn not to hoard God's goodness to ourselves. May we be witnesses and may we know that fresh, pure water bubbles up inside us. God's gift of his spirit. Amen

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