

SERMON FOR LENT 3 | 15.03.2020

Exodus 17: 1-7; Romans 5: 1-11; St John 4: 5-42

Last week we talked about generosity. It was Stewardship Renewal Sunday and we asked for your help to maintain St James' and especially to help us re-jig our income because we were depending too much on the fees that come from Hall and Church rentals.

I did not imagine that, just seven days after our stewardship pitch, £800 worth of bookings for the Church alone would have disappeared as one group after another have cancelled their events here. Indeed, friends in Paris and in Texas texted me last night to say all their services have been cancelled for the foreseeable future, Suzanne in Angleton saying that things in the US are crazy and she has never seen anything like this before.

So here we are, gathering as best we can, listening to the Gospel stories as we always do. And in the story, where is Jesus? Sitting down. On his own, waiting for someone to turn up.

Interestingly he is there first; only then does the woman – a woman and a stranger from another culture altogether – then show up because she needs to use the well next to which Jesus is sitting.

Quite quickly, as we read this strange story, it seems that they, Jesus and the Samaritan woman, are talking at cross purposes. Partly that's because Jesus hasn't stood on ceremony; he has asked the woman with her foreign background for a drink. And she is shocked because Jews don't talk to people like her. Ever. Quite soon the conversation gets all tangled up - with the depth of the well, and Jacob, and the roots of the dispute about whether Garazim or Jerusalem was the preferred mountain to worship on. The Samaritans were deeply conservative and found any innovations hard to accept so the interest of this woman in Jesus was pretty unusual too. To be fair, she is actually rather more concerned with finding out if she can avoid the back breaking job of carrying water back from the well.

And into all the froth and historical irrelevance Jesus calmly says: lady, none of that matters: *Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when all true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him...*

It could be said that life is pretty comfortable for many of us – and that we have taken all those comforts very much for granted. Suddenly, with Coronavirus, that has all changed – almost overnight. Even a minute or two’s reflection leads us to tot up all the things that can’t now happen. For goodness sake, I couldn’t even get a Sainsbury delivery slot last night; the whole system has crashed and the CEO has had to write a general email to ask all their subscribers asking us not to order mammoth loads of shopping ‘just in case’ because there is plenty of food available and the website can’t take it.

Part of the life we live today gives us the luxury of being pretty particular about what we want around us. I prefer this kind of rice, this brand of “whatever”, this destination for my holidays. And in religion, the same can often be true: we have time to be very particular about the particular style and focus for our faith. I was challenged outside Church last night by someone who had clearly boned up on all the verses in both the Old and New Testaments that forbade women to be anything more than mere assets for men. They should be at home, not teaching in public, he said with passion. As it happened, he was a very nice Russian – as if that matters...

Because if we had no churches and no ministers, no freedom to worship and no personal security – the kinds of environments which nurtured the faith of many of the people Rowan Williams talks about in our 2020 Lent Book, *Luminaries* - do you think many of these side issues would matter? In the face of Roman persecution, the evil of a concentration camp or the precariousness of 1980s El Salvador, do the niceties of our religious practice matter a jot? Of course not.

Jesus sits by the well and he tells this unsuspecting woman with her rather scrambled grasp on the history of her faith, that the one she is talking to is the Messiah, God’s chosen one. Moreover, what he is offering her, and us, is the grace of God – in metaphor terms, living water – which will keep her alive when everything else has collapsed. He is sitting there, offering this gift: the question is, does she want it?

And Jesus sits there still. He is waiting, open hearted and at peace with himself. He knows what he is going to face on Good Friday – and he is still calm. Whatever the future brings, whether by coronavirus or some other challenge, Jesus calmly waits for us to put our trust in him. Only he can see in the distant future; only he knows what ‘living water’ we need. Only he can provide it. And he will - if we ask.