

# Waters Gushing Up

a sermon preached on the

**3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday in Lent**

24 February 2008

at

**St Luke's in the City, Christchurch**

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Lections: Exodus 17:1-7; John 4:4-42

“Give me a drink.”<sup>1</sup> The Samaritan woman’s bluntness accurately and succinctly diagnoses our human condition. We are thirsty, desperate for waters which will quench our deepest longing. St Augustine’s observation, ‘You have made our hearts restless, until they find their rest in you,’ no doubt echoes the Psalmist: “As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.”<sup>2</sup> But in our great thirsting we confuse the life-giving stream with brackish and stagnant ponds.

Some people appear to have no consciousness of God, or actively reject the Divine, and attempt to satiate this fundamental human thirst with the waters of possessions, property, status, security. Or perhaps in the expression of sexuality, or in a carefully-guarded image of self intended to appeal to others. The mass media presents us daily, minute by minute, with a veritable deluge of marketable desires, from which none of us is totally immune. But everyone who drinks of such waters will be thirsty again.<sup>3</sup>

On the other hand, many do have a consciousness of God, but attempt to satiate the thirst which is deep with shallow religious ideas and practices. I confess that when I compare the unconscious hedonism of so-called ‘secular’ people with the superficial religiosity of so-called christian people it’s sometimes a tough call to decide which is worse. Doctrines, liturgies, the Bible, and Jesus himself are all capable of being misused in the service of the attempt to satiate our deepest thirst.

This is in fact a deadly serious condition. For the attempt to make these things satisfy our thirst is in truth motivated by our desire to make an external thing satisfy an internal longing. The doctrines when reduced to propositions (which of course is not what the doctrines are in truth) remain external to the human soul. Likewise the liturgy when it is reduced to mere words and actions remains outside us. Similarly the Bible when it is reduced to a collection of texts used to prove some prejudiced attitude. Jesus himself when reduced to an externalised 2000 year old historical figure remains outside us, an alien, a spaceman – and all our talk about his ‘friendship’ is little more than disembodied rhetoric. In these ways God is projected outwards, upwards, and forwards – God is not actually ‘Emmanuel’, *with us*, at all, but is entirely ‘other’ and entirely elsewhere. In truth, everyone who drinks of such waters will be thirsty again – just as it was so for the Hebrew people who came to Jacob’s well, and those who drank from the rock at Rephidim.<sup>4</sup> All externalised religion leaves us thirstier than we were before we drank from its stagnant pond. This may explain why christian people are frequently so pushy and insistent on making others think and believe certain fixed things - betraying a deep insecurity, the consequence of an unsatisfied deep thirst. Everyone who drinks of these waters will be thirsty again.

A detail in John’s exquisitely-crafted story that I have never noticed before is the woman’s observation: “Sir, you have no bucket.”<sup>5</sup> He has no bucket! That is to say, Jesus does not have the technology for getting at the water in Jacob’s ancient well. In our terms, he has no technique, no system, no plan. How can he quench the thirst of the world without a bucket! He doesn’t even have a staff to wave around, unlike Moses!<sup>6</sup> This deceptively-simple piece of information about Jesus may well turn out to be vital. For we christians are very fond of making Jesus into a technique, a system, an ‘answer’, a

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<sup>1</sup> John 4:7

<sup>2</sup> Psalm 42:1-2

<sup>3</sup> John 4:13

<sup>4</sup> Exodus 17:1ff

<sup>5</sup> John 4:11

<sup>6</sup> Exodus 17:5

solution. In our mouths the claim that Jesus is the ‘Way, the Truth, and the Life’,<sup>7</sup> is much the same as saying that a good education leads to a better job, that a ‘blue-chip’ investment ensures a secure future, and so on. In our mouths christian ‘mission’ is so often a mere technique - we make of Jesus a blunt instrument to be used at our disposal, in the service of our wants, to fend off our insecurities, to build up our reputations, to expand our coffers, to be an eternal life-insurance policy. This Jesus remains external to us, much as the stock-market is a reality outside of us, functioning according to a set of techniques and systems, levers and buttons to be manipulated for self-gain. But all our attempts to render Jesus as technique to satisfy our thirst fail. We remain desperately thirsty. Everyone who drinks of this water *will* be thirsty again!

But “those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty.”<sup>8</sup> The One who gives quenching water has no bucket. The water he gives does not involve any kind of technique or strategy or plan or system. The water that Jesus gives, rather, is a spring gushing up into life eternal.<sup>9</sup> Gushing up - from a well infinitely deeper than Jacob’s. “The well,” the Samaritan woman rightly observes, “is deep”<sup>10</sup> - though she hardly understands what depth indeed. Life, life eternal, life which quenches our thirst, is the life which we cannot manage or control or organise. Life eternal will not be subject to all our clever and hard-working plans. Life eternal will not be found in doctrines. Nor will life eternal be found in liturgies nor the Bible nor the church. Which is why there is no need for a bucket – indeed why our techniques are so utterly useless, and why they always leave us desperately thirsty, and probably why church fails to satisfy the deep thirst of so many. Life eternal is the stream which, as in Genesis, gushes up from the deep,<sup>11</sup> out of our control. Life eternal - like the Spirit who blows where she will,<sup>12</sup> as we heard last Sunday – defies all our religious techniques. This is God’s love, as St Paul observed in his letter to the church at Rome, which we cannot make ourselves worthy to receive, but which is “poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.”<sup>13</sup> Those who drink of the water that Jesus gives will never be thirsty.

If these things are true, then the living water is not an external reality at all, and this explains why our religious techniques fail us. The water which quenches our deep thirst is in fact *native to our humanity*, an inner reality. It is to be found on neither the Samaritan holy mountain nor in the Jewish holy Jerusalem.<sup>14</sup> The Temple and its cisterns for purification and its curtain for separating heaven from earth is swept away by the flood of God’s Incarnation in Christ. Water and blood flow from not from an external religious object but from within the pierced side of the Human One.<sup>15</sup> All our human attempts to manage and control the ‘traffic’, therefore, between the human and the Divine are useless, indeed counterproductive. The life-giving water simply gushes up from the depths, from within the human soul. In the strange dialogue between Jesus and the woman regarding her relationship history, the great surprise is that it’s from her own depths, from within the seemingly-murky and perhaps shameful waters of her own soul that life-giving water springs.<sup>16</sup> And this deep flood causes a complete revision of all her pre-conceived religious ideas.<sup>17</sup>

This is the water which permanently quenches her thirst – “The woman left her water jar and went back to the city.”<sup>18</sup> She left behind her water jar! That is to say, she abandoned her technique and system which she had previously employed in the service of attempting to quench thirst. In contrast to the disciples who are still preoccupied with external things and techniques,<sup>19</sup> the woman, having encountered her own depths, has no further need of technique. Now, confronted by her own deep stream, she is truly free, her thirst truly quenched.

We are made, it would seem, to thirst after life-giving water. This Lenten gospel shows us that our buckets, of whatever kind they may be, are of no use to us – we *will* thirst again. The waters which will quench our thirst are, however, those which spring up from the deep well, not from some external religious object, but from *within the depths of our own souls*. The water that God in Christ will give will become in us a deep spring of water gushing up from within us, to eternal life.

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<sup>7</sup> John 14:6  
<sup>8</sup> John 4:14  
<sup>9</sup> John 4:14  
<sup>10</sup> John 4:11  
<sup>11</sup> Genesis 1:1; 7:11  
<sup>12</sup> John 3:8  
<sup>13</sup> Romans 5:1,5,8  
<sup>14</sup> John 4:21  
<sup>15</sup> John 19:34  
<sup>16</sup> John 4:17-18  
<sup>17</sup> John 4:29  
<sup>18</sup> John 4:28  
<sup>19</sup> John 4:33