

starters for Sunday

Third Sunday in Lent

23 March 2014

The Mission and Discipleship Council would like to thank Rev Alan Falconer, retired Minister formerly of Aberdeen: St Machar's Cathedral, for his thoughts on the third Sunday in Lent.

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A thread running through all today's lessons is the affirmation of God's loving care to those who respond to him. God's covenant love continues despite all our human attempts to thwart it, domesticate it, attempt to control it. During our Lenten pilgrimage we reflect on our responsibility for being agents of frustration rather than channels of love.

An important symbol of God's grace, as we shall see from our texts is that of water, with the reminder that water is essential for sustaining human life, and that the real Water of Life is given by Jesus of Nazareth.

[Exodus 17: 1-7](#)

Exodus Chapter 15 verse 22 to Chapter 18 verse 27 contains 10 subsections or incidents on the way from the Sea to the Mountain. The passages reflect stages on the way, stopping places, as the People of Israel took account of their circumstances and journeying. The exodus liberation promised a new beginning for the People, filled with all the promises of joy, freedom, fullness of life. But the route from Egypt to this new life takes the people through the wilderness, a place of harsh extremes and testing conditions. What is clear is that at each of the 10 stages, the People of Israel are portrayed as a fractious, rebellious people. They have had enough and are at the end of their tether.

Our passage recounts yet another bout of strife, in which the people put God to the test. There is a crisis. In the searing heat of the wilderness, there is no water. Once again, they reflect that they were better off as slaves, since at least in Egypt, they had food and water. Here in the place of desolation and desertion, they are parched, lack energy, and some even lack the will to live.

Moses has no option but to voice the complaint of the People to God. God's response is decisive. He issues a command and a promise Moses is to act –in a manner that must have seemed ludicrous. Along with the elders he is to strike a rock. He is to seek water in the most unlikely and unyielding place. The command brooks no discussion.

Alongside this command, God makes a promise. I, God, shall be with you. God goes before the people in their time of desolation, anguish, isolation.

Moses obeys the command, and as the water flows so life is renewed, new life is possible.

The passage ends with a reflection by the narrator. The clue lies in the double name – Massah and Meribah. This incident has been about testing, challenging, doubting God. The people of



Israel want guarantees – proof that God is indeed present with the people. In this God is in danger of being perceived as a means to an end.

As Walter Brueggemann notes:

“Lent concern the liturgical, spiritual, socioeconomic act of leaving the guarantees of the dominant ordering of social power and coming to terms with the commands and promises of Yahweh”.

[Psalm 95](#)

This psalm is called Venite in Christian worship and liturgy. It is an invitation – a summons to the congregation to authentic worship. The central call of the psalmist is evident in verse 7b “O that today you would listen to His voice.”

The psalm has 2 stanzas.

Verses 1-7a is an invocation in the form of a hymn. It begins in the imperative mood, with an unrestrained shout – make a joyful noise. The psalm enjoins the people to praise God exuberantly, because he is a great God – above all others; He is the Creator of all worlds - an emphasis here on inclusivity, on the Universal; and He is the Shepherd – the Creator and Sustainer of the people -the God of the Covenant, an emphasis here on particularity. The psalm reminds us that human existence derives from God’s providence. In the light of the “otherness” of God we become aware of our creatureliness. We become whole people when we live in a real relationship with God as He is our Creator and King.

The second stanza – verses 7b -11 expresses a warning to the present generation. With brief allusions, it takes us back to Meribah and Massah, reminding the community of the wilderness experience, of the rebellious of their ancestors. The psalm ends with a clarion call in contrast to God’s provision and care, the attitude of the people has been contemptible.

As Robert Davidson noted: the psalm ends with the People being left to ponder. There can be no truly joyful celebration of God which does not lead to the discernment of the voice of God in their circumstance and the embrace of moral responsibility.



[Romans 5: 1-11](#)

Bible translators (United Bible Society) consider that chapter 5 v1 begins a new section of the letter, by focussing on some of the results of being in a right relation with God. Throughout this section, Paul writes in the indicative mood. All gifts are contained in that of the gift of right relation with God - justification. With the indicative mood, Paul is emphasising that God's grace is not an object or a theory or a wish dream. It is an event in which God takes the initiative to offer Himself to all. As verses 10-11 emphasise we are God's friends because Jesus Christ has made us thus. We are reconciled with God and each other.

James Dunn puts it thus:

God holds a person in good standing, reckons him an acceptable partner in covenant relationship, simply on the grounds of that person's trust.

Verses 6-11 have been called the hymn of the crucified Jesus. His death is an expression of God's love. From it flows specific blessings – peace with God in place of hostility; a mark of salvation; hope; and a share in the risen life of Christ.

God's love is poured like water – evident in baptism into His death and rising (v5). As Paul Tillich emphasises - You are accepted, accepted, accepted by God – simply accept the fact that you are accepted - and live in the light of it.

[John 4: 5-42](#)

This well-known incident in the Gospels comprises three scenes.

Jesus' dialogues with a Samaritan woman.

Jesus' dialogues with the disciples.

The Samaritan encounters Jesus and confesses that He is the saviour of the world.

Jesus is on his way from Judea to Galilee, and ventures into Samaria. Pious Jews normally travelled around Samaria to avoid defilement. Clearly for Jesus defilement comes from within, and thus he took the shortest route, which was along the top of the ridge that passed by Sychar and Jacob's well. Of course John is at pains to make the connection with the fact that just as the Patriarch Jacob had met and formed a relationship with a woman at a well, (Genesis 29: 7) so too did Jesus. Relations between Samaritans and Jews was embedded in the memory of the peoples. Jesus ignores the five hundred year old hostility between Jew and Samaritan. Three



hundred years earlier, the Greeks had used Samaria as a base for their control of Jewish territory. In 128 BCE the Jews retaliated by destroying the Samaritan Temple on Mount Gerizim. The Samaritans responded by invading the temple area in Jerusalem a few years before the birth of Jesus and scattering the bones of the dead across the area on the eve of Passover in order to defile the area and make it impossible for the Jews to keep the feast. Jew and Samaritan had a long history of antagonism and bitterness. Both had long memories. All the more remarkable then that Jesus tells a story in which a Samaritan traveller shows what it means to live in God's way (Luke 10 : 30-37). All the more remarkable that Jesus should ask for a drink from a Samaritan woman.

In this incident, we are presented with Jesus the man. Although John has a high view of the person of Jesus, the divine Word that became flesh and pitches his tent among us, in this same Gospel Jesus is portrayed as human. He gets tired and thirsty. He weeps and falls asleep. His humanity is as unmistakable as is his divinity.

Not only does Jesus break through centuries of the memories of antagonism, he also breaks through the social taboo of talking to a woman, particularly in an uninhabited place with no witnesses. The radical nature of the changes in the attitudes towards women is evident not only in this incident, but also in his including women in his band of disciples, in the fact that he was financed by them, and some of them travelled with him (Luke 8:1-3).

This Samaritan woman learns from Jesus about the living water, that leads to eternal life. He knows her personal situation. He points her to a new worship of God, which transcends the locales, the particularities of Gerizim and Jerusalem. As the conversation develops she comes to realise who Jesus is. In Judaism, the terms living water, the gift of God, are both used to describe the Torah – God's Law and Covenant of justice peace and right relations. It is God's wisdom that grants life. (Raymond Brown)

It is possible that this incident is also told by John to emphasise that the baptism of Jesus contains the gift of life. The early Church clearly made this connection, when in the art of the catacombs the scene of the Samaritan at the well appeared as a symbol of baptism. The beginning of this chapter in the Gospel notes that Jesus is baptising more disciples than John. The living water grants to the woman and to the disciples of Jesus, that which is essential for life in its fullness.



Meditation

Text: Give me a drink John 4:17a

Lord,

Teach us to seek you,

and reveal yourself to us when we seek you

For we cannot seek you unless you first teach us,

nor find you except you reveal yourself to us.

Let us seek you in longing,

and long for you in seeking.

Let us find you in love

and love you in finding,

O Jesus Christ our Lord (St Ambrose of Milan)

Nobody in our country can be unaware of the destructive power of water. Waves have battered our shores, disrupted power lines and railway tracks, destroyed fields and homes, isolated communities, leaving families crushed no one can be unaware of the destructive and disruptive power of water.

Yet water is a very precious commodity. In this country we tend to take it for granted. Pure flowing water gushes from our taps, our fountains, our rivers, our burns. It quenches, revives the dehydrated – and except in circumstances of drought and flood is easily accessible. But in many parts of the world, water is a very scarce commodity. In Saharan and sub Saharan Africa, regions of Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean, it is scarce – a precious commodity, not easily accessible. People, particularly women, have to go to the well in village, oasis, or shanty town to draw whatever water is available. Often it is stagnant, and needs to be boiled before use. Instead of being life-giving, it carries disease-polluted, is contaminated, and poisonous. Often what passes for fresh water is sold in containers, old gerry cans, themselves contaminated. Water is scarce, costly and is collected by whatever means are available – in barrels from roofs, from puddles and pools. Over one billion people in our world have no access to clean water. In her recent Richard Dimpleby Lecture, Christine Lagarde, the Managing Director of the International Monetary Fund, noted that by 2030 almost half of the world's population will live in regions of high water stress or shortage.



Often water, essential for life and living has been used as a means of political and economic control – sources diverted for one’s own nation or tribe, water courses constructed for one’s own economic advantage to the detriment of others – the Hebrew Scriptures are full of such stories, especially regarding attempts to control Jerusalem, as they are also full of stories and visions of water as that which vivifies a community or individual.

In scripture water is both seen as life giving and life threatening, life enhancing and life destroying. It is also evident in all these respects as a symbol for the Word of God.

The people under Moses had escaped from Egypt where they had become pawns in providing the economic base for Egyptian power. Their rights and human dignity denied they had become cogs in the Egyptian Imperial machine. But the desert to which they had come in their bid to secure freedom - trusting that God through Moses would lead them to new life - was an inhospitable place. It was arid, dusty, hot – and seemed to be endless. As a group they railed against Moses. Why had he brought them to this place of no life? Maybe Egypt had deprived them of dignity, but at least they had had food and water. A crisis in leadership was emerging. They doubted Moses – they were angry and disconsolate, and so Moses prays to God – and he receives an instruction from God.

Strike the rock, and water will come out of it

A rock – surely there must be some mistake? Had he misheard? A rock is unyielding. The last thing that comes from it is water. Water may flow over it, around it, but to be a source of water? Perhaps these thoughts were entertained by Moses, but he went ahead and did what he had been told to do. After all he had nothing to lose. The people were really rallying against him. He had in the past trusted in God and not been let down. He trusted that this trust would once again not be misplaced – and the water flowed. Out of the most unyielding substance, God is able to draw life enhancing water - to bring that which is lifeless that which enhances life and human living.

A Samaritan woman came to draw water. Jesus said to her “Give me a drink”

A lonely, isolated woman, shunned by her community, comes to draw water at the hottest time of day. A woman with a broken self-image, who has deep feelings of guilt, of worthlessness – who really feels and lives the rejection of her people – comes to draw water when no-else is around. Normally a communal exercise, a time when stories are told, experiences shared, help



sought and given, the drawing of water for this woman has become a lonely experience, an expression of her isolation and rejection. She has had five husbands – the absolute maximum permitted in Samaritan law at that time. Thus the man she is living with now, is not and could not be her husband. She has placed herself outside the norm and customs of the community – and so she lives a lonely existence, shunned and scorned by her community.

Jesus, tired, perhaps frustrated by the constant bickering of the disciples and their inability to understand, is drained, drawn and dry. Out of his need he asks - Give me a drink. The shock for the woman must have been palpable. A Jew asking a Samaritan for a drink from a member of a people regarded as the enemy. A man asking a strange woman to relieve his thirst. A conversation is struck up.

Jean Vanier, the Founder of the L'Arche Communities reflects on this incident:

It is very moving how Jesus meets and welcomes this fragile, broken woman

He knows the depth of her negative self-image

He does not judge or condemn her

He does not condescend or give her any moral lessons

He approaches her life, a tired thirsty beggar

asking her to do something for him

He begins to dialogue with her and creates a relationship with her

In trusting her he uplifts her and gives her back her self-esteem

Throughout the Gospels, Jesus is acclaimed as the One who takes our humanity upon Himself. He identifies with the poor, the vulnerable, those cast out of society. Like the prophets and the Psalmist he pleads their case, no matter the consequences for himself.

Jesus asks – Give me a drink

In this cri de coeur he cries out with the marginalised, with those who have no voice, who have little hope in our world

Give me a drink – I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink (Matthew 25:35)

In receiving water from this Samaritan woman, Jesus gives her life – a life of fullness of esteem, of relationship with God.

Water gives life...

Jesus came to quench our thirst for presence and acceptance



the thirst for meaning when we are confused
The water Jesus gives us are the waters of his light and his presence
that will take away pangs of loneliness and give new life...
if we drink from the fountain of love and compassion..
the life we receive is the life we give. (Jean Vanier)

Through her encounter with Jesus, the life of the Samaritan woman is turned upside down. The water He gives through his Word, his being, his presence, his way of life is life affirming , life enhancing. He brings life and new life to a parched community and to a lonely rejected woman doing so by his demeanour, his love and his compassion.

Jesus quenches our thirst. In our brokenness and our need, we dare to ask him

Give us a drink

Give us the water of life

Grant us purification

Give us that which is essential to life

During this period of Lent, let us also reflect on our approach to others, seeking ways to be life affirming and bringing hope in the dark places in our society, our community.

See Jean Vanier *Drawn into the Mystery of Jesus through the Gospel of John*



Prayers

Collect

Almighty God,
You give the water of eternal life
Through Jesus Christ your Son.
May we always thirst for you,
The spring of life and source of goodness;
Through the same Jesus Christ our Lord.

Loving God,
The wonders of your creation
the splendour of the heavens,
the beauty of the earth,
the order and diversity of creation
 all speak to us of your glory

The coming of your Son,
pitching his tent among us
identifying with our frailty and ordinariness
offering us a vision of life as you intend it
accompanying us on our journey as your pilgrim people
 speaks to us of the marvel of your love

The presence of your Spirit
guiding, probing, goading, inspiring,
enabling us to cry Abba- Father
uniting us to each other in baptism
 speaks to us of your continuing care for humankind and creation

We worship and adore you
God- Father, Son, and Holy Spirit

Compassionate Word – Word of life and love,
We are created to glorify you and enjoy you forever
You are our refuge and our strength,



yet we have sought to comprehend you
to contain you in our words and concepts

Lord have mercy...

We are called to follow your son in costly love for all
You are our Guide and Companion on the pilgrim way
yet we have grown tired of the journeying
have settled and built walls that exclude
creating caricatures and stereotypes of other companions of the way

Lord have mercy...

We are bound through your Spirit in the water of Baptism to You and each other
You have reconciled us to yourself and called us to the ministry of reconciliation
Yet we have fragmented your church and gone our own way

Lord have mercy...

God of new beginnings
forgive our sins, so that we can be free to love you and serve each other
On our pilgrimage, you offer us new life – the water essential for living
Grant us a renewed vision of your inclusive love-
welcoming all into your company
embracing each for the unique gifts that they bring

Weave us into one

Draw us into new harmonies of care

that we may be instruments of your grace and reconciliation in this nation and in our divided
world

All glory and praise be to you O God, Father Son and Holy Spirit

Now and ever and to the ages of ages

Amen



Prayer of Intercession

Living God, source of life, flowing with love

in Christ you give us living water

By your Spirit we are washed, refreshed, challenged and renewed

In prayer we reach out to the world,

Thirsting for justice, peace and kindness.

We pray for those countries racked by conflict,

Disease, famine, and poverty.

(name such countries)

We pray for those who face repression and discrimination

Persecuted for what they believe or for who they are

We pray for those who are the victims of crime, of violence and war

- especially those in refugee camps in Africa, Asia and the Middle East

Grant them peace

Lord in your mercy hear our prayer

We pray for the unemployed and homeless,

the sick and suffering

the lonely and those who feel unloved

the disabled and the disadvantaged

Grant them healing and wholeness

Lord in your mercy hear our prayer

We pray for those who work

To build a more just and loving world

All who strive to bring help and healing to those in need

- especially those working for Medecins sans frontiers, and Christian Aid

Grant them strength and courage as they serve others

Lord in your mercy hear our prayer

We pray for Churches throughout the world, as they continue their Lenten pilgrimage

Strengthen their faith and commitment

In our ecumenical cycle of prayer, we pray for the Churches of Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam



who give thanks for those clearing landmines and who seek to assist the poor subsisting on less than US\$1 per day

strengthen them in their witness

We pray for our own Church as it seeks to serve our nation

Lord in your mercy hear our prayer

We pray for those who are sick or suffering

Those uncertain of their future

Those who are dying

Their families seeking to stand with them at this time of need and uncertainty

Those who are bereft

Enfold them in our care

Lord in your mercy hear our prayer and let our cry come unto You

The Lord's Prayer

Musical Suggestions

CH4 59 Oh come, and let us to the Lord (= Psalm 95 – the Psalm of the day)

CH4 123 God is love, let heaven adore Him

CH4 604 Holy wisdom, lamp of learning

CH4 662 Jesus thou joy of loving hearts

CH4 348 Praise the One who breaks the darkness



Additional Resources

Resourcing Mission



[Resourcing Mission](#) is host to Starters for Sunday and other key mission resources for download and purchase. Online booking is available for [Mission & Discipleship events](#). Please check back regularly, as new items are being added all the time. If there is something you'd like to see on this new site, please [contact us](#) via the website.

Prayer Resources

These materials are designed to be a starting point for what you might look for in prayers. [Pray Now 2013](#) is available now from [St Andrew Press](#). [Revealing Love](#) will be available to purchase from November 2013.



Music Resources

The hymns mentioned in this material are ideas of specific hymns you might choose for this week's themes. However, for some excellent articles on church music and ideas for new music resources, please check out our online music magazine [Different Voices](#).

Preaching Resources



These materials are designed to be a starting point for what you might preach this Sunday. [Preachers Perspectives](#) is a resource where we have asked twelve preachers to share the insights they have gathered through their experiences of writing and

delivering sermons regularly.

Scots Worship Resources

[The Kirk's Ear](#) - Scots in the Kirk series for Advent, Christmas, Lent, Easter, Pentecost and other times of the year

[Wurship Ouk bi Ouk](#) - Metrical psalms, hymns, prayers and words for worship

[Scots Sacraments](#) may give you helpful material if you are celebrating Communion or have a Baptism.

The Mission and Discipleship Council would like to express its thanks to the Rev Alan Falconer for providing us with this Sunday's material.

Please note that the views expressed in these materials are those of the individual writer and not necessarily the official view of the Church of Scotland, which can be laid down only by the General Assembly.

