

March 12 Lent 3

Romans 5.1-11, John 4. 5-42

Are you weary?

Just a footnote before I start; Paul's letter to the Romans is reckoned to have been written around 50-60AD while John's gospel around 90-100AD.

I wonder if sometimes you have a week where one day stands out more than another? That was my experience this week. For me that day was Wednesday.

I was travelling on the train to London and found myself sitting opposite a young woman who set out a score of music by Elgar on the table between us and began conducting an imaginary orchestra. Her hands and the movements she made were beautiful. Slightly mesmerised I arrived in Paddington where I was met with all these purple balloons (*picture on the slide*) and more young woman handing out flowers and bags of mini chocolate eggs. It was International Women's Day! Then in the ladies toilets I bumped into a supermarket trolley packed with what looked like the contents of someone's home. Near it another young woman looked at me, quite fiercely this time, and I realised she was doing some washing and then using the hand driers to dry it. I should have been prepared for anything by then, but there in Parliament Square in freezing rain was a very large group, men and women, mainly dressed in purple and carrying purple umbrellas, accompanied by a procession of women wearing long cloaks like those seen in the Handmaid. I think they may have been campaigning on behalf of care workers.

That day I had witnessed human creativity, generosity, resilience and courage all in the space of an hour. Human beings are remarkable. We can do so many things, and often for or on behalf of others. And sometimes we get tired. And at this point, as we're now just about half way through Lent, our lectionary gives us readings that recognise that. Perhaps your initial enthusiasm for a Lenten practice of 10,000 steps a day, or whatever, is wearing thin or perhaps you are just feeling weary generally, regardless of Lent. Both readings offer respite. Notice in our gospel reading that even Jesus got weary sometimes. Here he is, sitting by a well in the hottest part of the day, 'weary from the journey', John says.

An important person in my journey as a follower of Jesus was the RE teacher at my secondary school, Miss Hutchinson, usually referred to as Hutch. She was a rather fierce character whose long grey cloak matched grey hair scraped back into a bun, and she had an approach to the bible

that was new to me. It was not something other, read aloud in small chunks from a holy book on Sundays, but literature full of interesting content waiting to be unpacked. She pointed out that John the Baptist was Jesus' cousin so the two families would have known each other. John B and Jesus might have played together as children. To me as a young teenager this was startling information – Jesus a child, with cousins, playing... Anyway when we were offered the chance to have regular bible reading notes I said yes and it wasn't long before I read for the first time our passage from Romans this morning; the section that speaks about justification by faith- the rallying call of the Reformation.

It was the comment on it that I've found myself coming back to time and again. It went something like this – you are going along as though you have to deserve God's love by your good deeds when in fact there is nothing you can do to deserve God's love. It's a free gift that he invites you to receive. I know you'd rather earn it, work for it, deserve it and be seen as wonderful by those around you; but you need to step down from that particular pedestal to the ground here where I'm waiting for you. All the work has been done by Jesus. You just have to receive the gift.

I still recall the feeling of a load being lifted. It wasn't all up to me! I didn't have to try so hard! If there was to be growth in goodness or whatever it would be related to my accepting God's grace, it would be the work of the Holy Spirit rather than my own efforts. It would be the result of something at work inside me which I had received rather than something I had to generate myself.

Which is where we come to Jesus' conversation with the woman at the well. Jesus famously compares what we might call two different approaches to quenching our thirst for God – one is like the hard work of drawing water from a well using a bucket while the other relies on a spring inside us given by Christ himself. (*Picture of running water*) Again, it's the difference between relying on our own efforts and trusting what is already at work inside us because of our faith in Jesus, because of what he has done for us. In church we say that what is at work inside us starts with our baptism and is further fulfilled in our confirmation. At both those points we receive prayer for the Holy Spirit. As we go through life God invites us to trust in that gift and live our lives from that place.

My interpretation of this morning's scriptures has focussed on the inner transformation of individuals, but it can't stop there. The spring of water inside us can bubble out to others and into the dry parts of our world. And, again, it doesn't have to depend on huge efforts on our part. This is God's work and we relax into letting it happen through us. We note

where God might be drawing us. If you are feeling weary of the journey, as it were, then stick with that and open your mind and heart to what God might be saying to you. What is causing your weariness? Is there something you are being invited to let go of? Or perhaps a risk you are being invited to take – a shift out of your usual routine, something you are resisting?

Both our readings offer hope, and it's a hope offered in a place of challenge. The woman at the well would have been despised because of her marital state (married 5 times when Jewish law permitted a maximum of 3) which is why she came to draw water at a time when no one else was likely to be around. The Christians in Rome were experiencing persecution because of their faith. It's in these difficult places that hope is forged. We don't choose these tough places; they are so often what life throws at us. We may try to avoid them just as the woman tried to avoid Jesus' gradually deepening their conversation. But it's in these very places that there can be a shift, a movement towards more life, more grace, more hope.

At the end of her encounter with Jesus we see the woman leaving her water jar (after all she didn't need to use external means to draw water – this is John's gospel- so full of symbolism) and running to share the living water she had met in Jesus with the very people whom she had been avoiding.

Jesus draws us into a conversation with him about the difficult places in our lives and the life of our world just as he did with the woman at the well. He invites us to refresh ourselves, to drink from him, the fountain of living water. One of the things I noticed when people were being offered flowers and chocolates at Paddington was that not everyone was willing to receive them. It was as though they thought there might be some catch. This really isn't the case with what Christ offers us. There are no strings attached and it's entirely up to us whether or not we accept the gift, whether we drink the living water.

What's not to like, though, about being refreshed ourselves and then passing on the gift to a thirsty world?