

Exodus 17: 1-7
Psalm 95
Romans 5: 1-11
John 4: 5-42

Sermon by Harry Kerr

Many years ago a young woman was collecting her children at a church kindergarten. She felt her life wasn't going anywhere despite having recently migrated to Australia. While she waited for the children she wandered into the church out of curiosity. It was Holy Week. She was surprised to see around the walls posters from the International year of Homeless people in preparation for the Good Friday Service. It was the last thing she expected to see in a church. It touched her. It marked the beginning of a long often turbulent journey which changed her life, a journey which led to confirmation, bringing her children to baptism, retreats, theological study, two degrees (now working on a doctorate,) involvement in the life of the church at many levels and a bringing together of her passion for the environment with her new found faith and spirituality.

The Gospel readings this Lent describe encounters with Jesus which change lives. That is not surprising as they are the traditional readings used in the final stages of preparation for Easter Baptism. They ask us to explore how Jesus is changing our lives. They ask us how we as Christ's body invite people into life changing encounters.

Last Sunday it was Nicodemus, the locked in pillar of the temple establishment. To-day we find Jesus as far from the temple as it was spiritually possible to get. Jesus is playing away. On a journey to Galilee, John tells us, he *has to go through Samaritan territory*. There are none so bitter as those from a common tradition who do it differently whether Catholics and protestants in Ireland, Shias & Sunnis in Iraq. For the Jews, Samaritans were racially impure and apostate in religion. Jesus didn't have to go there. There was another road, the road taken by pious Jews to avoid the Samaritans. John tells us that Jesus has to go there because his God given mission is about moving out and playing away.

He arrives in the heat of the day at Jacob's well the symbol of the shared tradition, desperately thirsty with no way of getting the water. So when the woman arrives he begs her to draw him some water. It was a desperate act for a man to talk to a strange woman, for a Jew to talk to a Samaritan. Why is she at the well in the heat of the day? Why doesn't she come in the cool of the morning when the women gather for a gossip as they fill their buckets? This woman is different. We can imagine her, maybe abused as a child, then staggering from one unhappy, maybe abusive marriage to another till she ends up with someone who just wants a woman without commitment. She would be ostracised by her community who probably blamed her for her own abuse. If people blame you for something not your fault you end up feeling guilty. She would live a miserable half life, out of sight with this man in some humpy on the fringe of town. Jesus really is playing away.

She fears a trap. What's this Jew after? Jews weren't meant to use the same buckets as Samaritans. The gulf is too wide even for a drink on a hot day. Jesus says: *If only you could see beyond all that, you would ask me for living water?* She says *how? We have the bucket. Jacob gave this well to us. We have the tradition too.* Jesus persists: *This is living water.*

Those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.” This isn’t just water sitting in a well or water out of a tap. Living water, the surf, full of energy, the waterfalls in the gorges of Northern Australia where you can plunge in on a hot day and come to life, the rain that brings new life to the land. This water is the sign of the gift of life without limit. John is talking about the water of baptism drawing us into the life of God.

The woman says: *I’ll be in that. No more carrying heavy buckets in 40^o heat.* Jesus asks her to call her husband. It becomes clear that Jesus recognises who she is. He sees right into her. She knows he is special. Can he be the one? Can he be that special? As a Samaritan she knows where she is and where God is. Jesus invites her to move far out of the box, beyond rival temples, beyond sacred sites to where the new humanity worships in the presence of the risen one. In Jesus the life of holy God has come to her.

The young woman I mentioned at the beginning reflected in her own journey like this: *Jesus is the one who opens up the “God-life:” Jesus is love, is utterly God filled. When I read about Jesus’ God-filled life it gives me enough in practical terms, out of the God experience, to at least see the ideal of how life ought to be lived and I guess that, in a way, is what Jesus is and is for.*” And we can hear echoes of the Samaritan woman when she says: *It’s just such an incredible release and relief and happiness that Gosh it’s O.K. after all. It’s a sort of quietness. It’s like when you are given a small glass of water in the desert. A small glass of water isn’t very much. But at first it’s all you need.*

We know that the Samaritan woman’s life changed totally. She goes back into the town, no longer hiding in shame & tells the people what has happened. They are freed up to make their way to Jesus to stay with him and to know him as God’s chosen one. A whole community is set free from its nasty little secrets and petty scandals.

The challenge for us is to be less concerned for doctrinal and liturgical purity and to follow Jesus in playing away and in going with him into unfamiliar territory. Last year’s Anglican Synod approved in tis budget resource to reach out to generation Y. Some youth leaders objected. They said we should concentrate on projects which promoted real rather than virtual relationships. Yet I have heard a serious missiologist describe how many young people live a large part of their lives in the virtual world which is exciting but can be harmful. It is vital that the church is willing to play away to bringing the presence of Jesus into that world. It’s beyond me and I suspect most of us here but it is to be taken seriously.

The collective which is planning this year’s Palm Sunday peace march is dominated by the hard left. Yet there is a great welcome for people from faith communities taking part and agreement that there must be a Christian and a Muslim speaker at the rally. We must assume that there are seekers out there, thirsty people seeking living water. We need to find ways of moving beyond our temples to travel with them. I have met several intelligent, well-educated young Anglo women who have discovered a new spiritual basis for their life in Islam. They wear the Hijab, observe all the disciplines. They tell me that they find in Islam a spiritual basis for feminism. That may surprise us. We should take notice.

Sometimes I feel that we can be very good at doing things for people and here in North Melbourne. We have a proud record: asylum seekers, Food co-op, homework club, prison

ministry and much more. I am not sure - and I include myself in this - that we have been so good at opening up the offer of living water to the people we serve. A lady came to me in St. Alban's once and told me she would love to come back to church but she couldn't because she felt so guilty. There was a long history of an oppressive Catholic upbringing. The Samaritan woman must have been loaded with guilt. Maybe we need to start with ourselves. Do we want Jesus to offer us living water? Do we really want to move out of our temples, out of our comfort zones to embrace life without limit which is so pervasive that whole communities will want to change? In all my years of ministry I have found that to be close to the lives which are changing is the most powerful experience of all. That is still the challenge which faces us.