

27/02/2005

Exodus 17:1-7

Psalm 95

Romans 5:1-11

John 4:5-42

Water, love and life

WH Auden has a poem called “First Things First” which ends with the line: “Thousands lived without love, not one without water.” Living without love would be hard enough, but find yourself lost in a desert or any environment bereft of drinkable water and our utter dependence on it is soon obvious. Water is the elemental substance; in reality it affects everything connected with us. Human awareness of the importance of water has meant all cultures give it symbolic meaning, and we know its place within the faith and life of the church. Water is a source of life, a vehicle of cleansing, and a centre for regeneration. In recent times we have known another aspect of water, its chaotic, destructive power, surging up from the primal deep as a Tsunami to sweep all before it. And on the other end of the scale in connection with the Share appeal, the Moderator has written to us about the devastations caused by drought, particularly in the Wimmera and Mallee.

As we make our Lenten journey, we revisit stories of those who have made journeys in times past. Our first reading is one of several we could find which pictures Israel on the way from a past act of redemption towards a promise yet to be fulfilled. The wilderness is a place here, but it is more than that: it is a state of mind. They are stuck in the gap between promise and fulfilment and, in a moment of difficulty, they grumble and blame God by pinning it on Moses. They found it hard that God did not lead them from oasis to oasis: from good time to good time. They had had enough of this journey; their souls were parched and dry. Earlier successes with obedience did not make the next stage of the journey easier to accomplish, and it did not yield greater spiritual maturity. On this trip, a long way down the road, their question was still basic: is the Lord with us or not? It was like asking, does the sunrise each morning? But there was also another level to it. They accused God of bringing them out to put them to death, rather than bring them to life. In this way they slandered the promise, and demeaned the sacred purpose of the journey.

In the Hebrew Scriptures water is a symbol of life, and the wells and springs in the desert frequented by nomads are places of hospitality and joy. Miracles occur at water holes; fundamental encounters between people take place on these sites. But here in Exodus the people were thirsty, and they thirsted to see evidence of God’s presence. In this they sought to co-opt God into the role of being their servant. This was a reversal of relationship and yet God heeded their request. But something odd happened in the naming of the site. Even though this was a place where God graciously gave them water and love. Despite the fact that here, through the mediation of Moses, they were preserved from death, Massah and Meribah [translated Test and Quarrel] commemorate their recalcitrance. This reminds us of what it is like being God’s people. It is to struggle to stay focussed on the one whose promise of life gave rise to this journey; whose opening of the rock for wayward people refreshed life and faith that was sorely parched.

Jacob's well was a site which had yielded many blessings to the people. In Samaritan tradition Sychar and Mt Gerizim were associated with the sacrifice of Isaac and Jacob's dream of the ladder between heaven and earth. These are stories about God's providence, and about how God travels with us in life. Jacob was a great and venerable ancestor, and there was more than one sense in which his well was deep. But something deeper and greater is revealed in the encounter that took place there between Jesus and the woman. His request for a drink turns into a conversation about the quenching of a much deeper thirst. Water is offered that comes from life-giving depths. It is the elemental water, the source of life. This is something greater. This is living water and Jesus is the water bearer.

We should not get too tied up in knots about how many husbands the woman had. Like the people in Exodus, the woman at the well was at a certain place on the journey of faith and life. Her mind was set, she was constrained by what she knew up to then. Once she met the water-bearer, her whole life changed, as did the lives of many others. Once they met him they discovered for themselves that the water-bearer was indeed the elemental person, the Saviour of the world. He put them in touch with things divine; his fellowship answered their profoundest longings for life.

Is it clear the encounter between Jesus and the woman happened without preconditions. It broke the rules. Boundaries were crossed. Jesus gave the woman the gift of himself and in this we are to see God's love for the world at work exactly as God intended. This love was not caused by the attractiveness of its object. This love came from the essential nature of the heart of God. This is the love that is summed up by Paul when he says, ...the proof of God's amazing love is this, while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

We have ended up talking about love. But the conversation between Jesus and the woman was about water. So we see that in the mission of God water and love go together. If there is to be life, both are needed, and the offer of water comes from one whose sole purpose is to love the world. That is also why on Easter morning we will celebrate the mystery of how God again opened the rock that held love in death. This happened that all people may know the amazing love, and go forth to live a new life.