

Third Sunday in Lent: What is 'Living Water'?

Romans 5:1-11; John 4:5-42

How long could you last *without food*? Many hunger strikers have managed several weeks. It's said that in the middle ages St Catherine of Siena lived for several years fed only by the Blessed Sacrament. Jesus fasted for 40 days in the desert; and, as we heard in the gospel a fortnight ago, 'afterwards he was hungry'.

Which is probably something of an understatement. Jesus was literally hungry. As no doubt he was in the strange story we've just heard this morning; for after trudging through the hot dry landscape of Samaria he sits down while the disciples go off to buy food.

But what about surviving without *water*? Not more than a few days, before the throat and the lungs and the whole body cease functioning. Water is absolutely essential to life. Without the springs below, and the clouds and rain above, and the oceans around, without water the planet is dead, and all of us with it.

So no surprise that when a woman comes to the well Jesus says 'Give me a drink'. *He's thirsty*.

Or is he? The conversation that follows is as perplexing as the one we heard last Sunday between Jesus and Nicodemus. And once again, it seems that the *literal* meaning of the words is not what counts. Jesus is luring us away to a more *spiritual* meaning. As though water and physical thirst no longer matter; as though the material has become *immaterial*.

So has Jacob's well, has Wessex Water, become redundant? Jesus speaks instead of 'living water'. If you drink this you will never be thirsty again. It needs no well, no bucket, no pipes, for the spring is inside you and from it the water 'gushes up to eternal life'.

This is similar to what St Paul wrote to the Romans, as we heard. 'God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.' The water, gushing up or poured out, is the living *Spirit*. And it seems that life in the Spirit *marginalises* physical life and all its material needs for food and water, for shelter and companionship.

And more. As the conversation goes on, the living water seems to marginalise *religion* too. True worshippers, says Jesus, worship 'in spirit and in truth'. So there's no need for temples and their rituals. In the life of pure spirit, there's no relevance for special times or places, for sacraments or even for our bodies. A deep, pure *spiritual life*, such as philosophers and mystics have dreamed of

over the centuries; and now, outside a town in Samaria, it has arrived and is in our grasp. So that when the disciples return from their shopping, Jesus spurns their offer of food; for, he says, 'I have food to eat that you do not know about'. Spiritual food, the bread of life, which requires no farms or shops or kitchens.

But *can this be?* Can this perennial dream of pure spirit, shorn of matter, can it be *lived?* Careless reading of passages like this from St John's Gospel can induce severe delusions. For if I imagine I can indeed live and pray without any physical needs or distractions, then I'm in for disillusionment. Our bodies, our stomachs, our minds too, will bite back with their primal urges; and we'll find that worshipping in spirit and in truth is not so easy.

Or we'll realise that it doesn't mean this kind of immateriality after all. Jesus said 'Give me a drink'; and he meant it. At the end, tortured on the cross, he cried again, 'I'm thirsty'; and he meant it. He is human body and mind, as we are. And our Christian faith is not one of fleshless spirit but of *incarnation*, that is, enfleshment: God meeting us in our own flesh and blood. As Archbishop William Temple said long ago, 'Christianity is the most *materialistic* of all religions'.

So what is this living water? What is this food that Jesus lives from? It is not the rejection or the abolition of ordinary food and drink, of ordinary material life. But it *is* the denial that ordinary material life, the world of food and drink, of work and home, of economies and nations, the denial that they are *the sum* or the whole purpose of our existence. Rather, the amazing proclamation that in and through those material things, in and through our own bodies, an eternal world of spirit and of truth is beckoning; a world of lasting value, where food and refreshment don't wear out.

And that is precisely why our faith is built on the poetic words of the Bible, with their concrete, penetrating images; why it is built on the sacraments given us by Jesus, on water and bread and wine; the living water and the bread of life, utterly physical, and utterly spiritual.