

12 March 2023

Exodus 17:1-7
Romans 5:1-11
John 4:5-4



*There's a hole in the bucket, dear Liza, dear Liza,
There's a hole in the bucket, dear Liza, a hole.*

*Then fix it, dear Henry, dear Henry, dear Henry,
Then fix it, dear Henry, dear Henry, fix it.*

You may remember this song from your childhood; a dialogue between two characters, Liza and Henry, about a leaky bucket.

The song describes a deadlock situation: Henry has a leaky bucket, and Liza tells him to repair it. But to fix the leaky bucket, he needs straw. To cut the straw, he needs an axe. But the axe is blunt, so he is told to sharpen it. To sharpen the axe, he needs to wet the sharpening stone. To wet the stone, he needs water. When Henry asks how to get the water, Liza's answer is, of course, "in a bucket".

*But there's a hole in my bucket, dear Liza, dear Liza,
There's a hole in my bucket, dear Liza, a hole.*

In this deadlock we go in a complete circle of futility; and we end up no better off than when we started.

In a parched desert country water is a symbol of life and of God's goodness. The gift of water was one of God's saving acts during the exodus, given despite the grumbling of the people.

The event recorded in today's Gospel occurs near Jacob's well. The Old Testament does not mention its origin, but this particular well at Sychar is located near the centre of the land purchased by Jacob around Shechem according to Genesis 23. It is a deep well, fed by underground springs.

And here, beside Jacob's well, Jesus converses with a Samaritan woman about living water. The location of this event is important. It is important because it helps emphasise the fact that Jesus came to fulfil all that had gone before in the patriarchs and in the Law. Jacob was revered by both Jews and Samaritans. God gave Jacob the name Israel, and he became the father of the nation that was to bear his name, the people of the Covenant. As Jesus surpasses the old Covenant he sets the scene for his followers, the Christians, to be the true covenant people of God. And so this living water offered by Jesus surpasses the physical water provided by the well of the patriarch Jacob.

This encounter between Jesus and the woman is remarkable in several ways. For a start, in Palestine of the period, men did not speak with women.

Further there was a major rift between the Jews and the Samaritans. When Solomon died, the kingdom of David was divided in two: the northern kingdom of Israel centred on Samaria, and the southern kingdom of Judah centred on Jerusalem. The northern kingdom fell to the Assyrians in about 721 BC, and as a result was overrun with people not of the Hebrew race and faith. It appeared to have lost its racial and religious purity. The breach widened further when, 300 years later, the northerners, by then called Samaritans, built their own temple on Mount Gerizim. In order to justify this, they rejected all scripture other than the first 5 books – these did not cover the period of King David, and therefore contained no reference to the temple in Jerusalem.

Jesus and the woman are separated by a vast gulf of gender, race and religion. Against this extraordinary background of division an extraordinary conversation takes place.

The dialogue is a long string of double meanings and misunderstandings; with a succession of dead ends presented by the woman.

Jesus offers the woman living water – the regular phrase for running water, as opposed to still or stagnant water. The woman reminds him that he hasn't got a bucket, so is in no position to offer water. Is he somehow greater than Jacob, the original giver of the well? (Notice how she refers to Jacob, perhaps rather pointedly,

as “*our father Jacob*”. There is a long memory of what now divides this people despite their once shared ancestry.)

When Jesus responds with the promise of a water that slakes thirst forever, she is suddenly submissive. She probably doesn’t know what it is he is really offering, but she wants it nonetheless.

But Jesus, as ever, puts his finger on the point where her life is most sorely in need of living water. Again the back and forth of repartee: “Call your husband.” “Haven’t got one”. “No, you haven’t got one: you’ve had five, and the man you’re living with now isn’t your husband”

Imagine this – she’s had a life composed of one emotional upheaval after another, with enough husbands coming and going to keep the village gossips in a lifetime occupation. We assume that her various marriages ended in divorce. We don’t know actually whether she was equally *sinned against* as sinning. We don’t know what emotional traumas in her background may have made it harder for her to form lasting emotional bonds, but we infer that the traumas she may have been at least partly responsible for will have made it harder and harder for her each time.

Her reaction is a classic example of what every pastor knows only too well: put your finger on the sore spot, and people will at once start talking about something else. “Are you a prophet by any chance? We have this thing about which mountain we should worship on.” A good distraction that one: after all, we Samaritans and you Jews can’t both be right, so maybe no-one knows, maybe nothing is that certain, and maybe the morality we were taught is equally uncertain.

Again, we often get the modern equivalents – the “reasons” we once worshipped somewhere, but do so no longer.

But then, as now, they’re excuses and they’re irrelevant. God and worship places and styles aren’t the same thing; God and the church aren’t the same thing. God’s claim is on every human life – and God’s offer of a new kind of human life for all who give up the stagnant water and come to him for the living variety is absolute, and

can't be avoided by questions about which church people think they should go to, or whether Mount Zion or Mount Gerizim is the true holy mountain.

When Solomon dedicated the first Temple a thousand years before Jesus, he was quite clear that heaven itself wasn't big enough for God, so that one single building couldn't hope to contain him. Holy buildings, and holy mountains, are at best signposts to the real thing. If they become substitute for it, you're in trouble. That way lies idolatry, the worship of something that isn't God as if it were.

So Jesus replies to the woman, "Spirit, not mountain, is what matters; and the One God is looking for Spirit-people right now."

Oops, this is sounding challenging. Let's duck the subject for now: "Oh, very interesting. Of course, one day the Messiah is coming. He'll explain all that complicated stuff."

But Jesus is not going to let her block again. "I am, who am speaking to you." And here at last comes breakthrough, a revelation of God.

Tradition went on to name the woman at the well Photini, meaning "luminous one". Having received the light of the knowledge of God from Jesus, she went on to be a bearer of that light to her fellow villagers, and, tradition says, even to the Emperor Nero some years later.

The woman had been trapped in her understanding; trapped in sin and shame; trapped by the legacy of a succession of failed relationships; trapped in her people's battles of religion and culture – a kind of deadlock situation rather like that presented by Henry's circular complaints to dear Liza in the song.

It is easy for us too to become trapped in a fruitless mindset ... e.g.

- we can get brainwashed by the surrounding culture to believe that the present world is the only one there is, so what's the point ...;

- we can become trapped in lies;
- we can get trapped in unforgiveness and bitterness;
- we may feel trapped in having taken a position on something and then being too proud to back down and acknowledge another point of view.

The Exodus reading too reflects a people trapped in a particular understanding: they were longing for the known past (while tending to forget how problematic that past was), rather than engaging with the risky future.

But Jesus makes everything new. Jesus makes *everything* new.

Many of us travel through life with our buckets filled with holes, and feeling the futility of our situations, feeling trapped.

But the answer is to come to Jesus. We can think of Jesus as the substitute bucket, the perfect bucket, supplying the living water needed to resolve life's deadlocks.

Ultimately, all that the woman needed was available through receiving Jesus as her Messiah, as Lord. The same is available to us.

In baptism we reflect this. Symbolised in ritual water, in baptism we receive the new life offered by God in Jesus. Today [at 10am] we baptise three children. Of an age when they cannot make a faith decision for themselves, the action of baptism emphasises that actually the work of faith is first of all a work of God's initiative and grace – as it was for Photini, the woman at the well. The work of faith is a work of God's initiative and grace, to be followed by (we trust) a lifelong reception and outworking of that grace. Not for us the futility of Liza and Henry: we receive, and we help others come to, the living water of Jesus.

Sources

This sermon owes a great deal of its content to Wright *Twelve Months of Sundays, Year A*, and Wright *Matthew for Everyone* with little adaptation in places.

Other sources:

- Whitacre, *John*, IVP NT Commentary Series
- <http://www.edwardfudge.com/sychar/html>
- <http://www.netours.com/jrs/2003/jacobs-well.htm>
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- Beasley-Murray, *John*. WBC