

Third Sunday in Lent 19th March 2017

[Exodus 17: 1-7; Psalm 95; Romans 5: 1-11 ; John 4:5-42](#) from Vanderbilt

[Lent 3 A March 19 2017](#) Textweek

Today's gospel of thirty-seven verses must be one of the longest readings we have throughout the year; and that maybe is enough for us to question its significance.

Like the Old Testament reading today it is a narrative that features water, and central to the narrative unfolding is the starting point of 'thirst'.

"Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon. 7 A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink."

"the Israelites journeyed by stages, as the LORD commanded. They camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink. 2 The people quarrelled with Moses, and said, "Give us water to drink."

The Old Testament story unfolds in seven verses, and yet in the gospel we have thirty-seven and so again we're drawn to contemplate its significance and in looking more closely we might see that the gospel has some real parallels with us at St Paul's; and its length is due to the writer's desire to frame so much teaching within the one narrative.

The first round of teaching is in verses 5-14 and introduces the notion of "*living water*", a simple theological metaphor that needs explaining.

And that is done in the following verses up to verse 26, then in verse 27 there is a scene change, or rather change in characters,

"Just then his disciples came",

which serves as an opportunity to repeat the same teaching in a different way.

We will need to appreciate some of the context of what is being taught and in that context we'll see the similarities with ourselves at St Paul's.

The dialogue about the woman's husbands in verses 16 to 19 is purely a device the writer uses to illustrate that Jesus recognised as a prophet; and that recognition brings into focus socio-political and religious dispute:

"Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem."

Right in the middle of the gospel narrative there is a classic 'us and them' being addressed and it is in contemplating that same dynamic that we might pause and look at the similarities with ourselves today.

We've just gone through an election that was WA's own version of the Samaritan versus Jew confrontation; and the length of the ballot paper was almost as long as today's gospel.

But even closer to home and much more theologically aligned is our current relationship with the Muslim community that share this precinct for their Friday prayers.

And the parallels are really quite valuable for us to look at; for the Samaritans and the Jews have some similar differences to the general differences associated between Christian and Muslim.

The Samaritans claimed that they were the true Israel; they had their own sacred precinct on Mount Gerizim and claimed that it was the original sanctuary as opposed to the Jews holding Jerusalem as 'the' sacred precinct. And although both groups shared much in regard to sacred Scriptures the Samaritans claimed that their version of the Pentateuch was the original and that the Jews had a falsified text produced by Ezra during the Babylonian exile.

Each tradition, although with some very common beginnings clearly developed and evolved its own version of 'truth'. The Samaritan Scriptures did not include the Hebrew books of the prophets and arguably they therefore were missing part of the story that pointed forward to the unfolding future; and it was in recognising Jesus as a Prophet that the 'us and them' dynamic became apparent in the gospel story.

Christians and Muslims have a similar difference in regard to the orientation of their respective sacred precincts; and both have their beginnings in the Abrahamic tradition and both share much sacred texts in common, each claiming a truth above the truth of the other; and likewise both have evolved into a socio-political and religious dynamic of 'us and them'.

So we can readily find ourselves in today's gospel, and that's a good start for a community that seeks to live out the gospel.

And the revelation of Christ that is the teaching that the gospel writer is illuminating in today's reading is really so appropriate for today, and even though first shared a long time ago, it remains, like much of Christ's teaching, so little understood.

Two lines in the text reveal the new paradigm that Christ reveals:

"21 Jesus said to her,

"Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem."

"23 But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. 24 God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth."

Jesus sees beyond both Mount Gerizim and Jerusalem, beyond Samaritan and Jew, he sees beyond Labor and Liberal and beyond Christian and Muslim; and he is not looking into some future possibility for he says

“the hour... is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth”.

There is a delightful give-away line in verse 28

“Then the woman left her water jar and went back to the city”, she left after hearing this teaching and her thirst was quenched.

In the recent election only those on one side could celebrate a win; and when we look at it so much of our daily living has an orientation to satisfying only one side of the global story, and of our story; we rarely, if ever discover the thirst we each have for all to win.

The disciples are placed into the story so that this new understanding can be repeated, and yet we do not find out if they ever really understood what was being taught.

In the life of this community we are perhaps living another episode of this very same gospel narrative. Feizel, the Imam of the small Muslim community that shares the hall as a place of Muslim worship each Friday is currently in the process of buying the house at 168 Hampton road, and so becoming even more closely a part of the St Paul’s precinct and so sharing with us the journey we share together.

For some this will very much bring to life the ‘us and them’ dynamic of the Samaritans and Jews; what is really surprising and delightful is that three different news agencies from three different continents have all expressed an interest in the story.

And the interest in the story, is the same interest we have discovered in today’s gospel; there is a new paradigm, a new worldview unfolding that is revealed in Christ, and goes beyond the old dynamic of ‘us and them’.

Sadly, we can’t follow the journey of the disciples to see what path we have to walk into this new paradigm, and that’s not just because it is not recorded in the story today, but also because somehow the path followed by the church throughout its history has been one of creating even more ‘us and them’ dynamics.

We can however look to these ancient stories and seek to live out what we find as life giving within them.

In the first reading we hear that “*the whole congregation of*” St Paul’s as they came through the wilderness of Lent discovered, experienced or realised their thirst.

Like we all do, they *quarrelled* and *complained* and they asked Moses for water to drink; and of course Moses did not have all that was asked of him; but he did ask an important question and one that is perhaps the key to quenching our thirst; he asked

“What shall I do with this people?”

And in that asking, and remember he does not ask for water, he does not ask God to provide that which is being asked for; rather in the asking he finds a new orientation, to another place, a place of abundance for the whole congregation, and he finds the water that quench the thirst of all.

Perhaps as we continue in Lent we might ask the question Moses asks for ourselves:

“What shall I do with this people?”

What shall I do to quench the thirst and bring life to life’s dry places

What shall I do to drink of the Living water that is the Divine Spirit

What shall I do to become

“a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.”

and we might heed these wise words from Rabindranath Tagore

You can't cross the sea merely by standing and staring at the water.

Peter Humphris