

2020 – 03 – 15 Barbara Mitchell

Lent 3: Exodus 17:1-7 and John 4:7-39

Water is an interesting phenomenon. There is either too much, too little or it's the wrong kind when there is a heavy downpour on parched ground after a prolonged drought!

Over the past few weeks I have definitely felt there is too much water as I have driven my car through puddles that resembled ponds and, on one occasion, had to turn my car around rather than take the foolhardy action of driving through a flood at Bough Beech!

But this would not have been a situation familiar to the writers of today's readings. Although the last time we were in Israel there was a torrential down pour in Jerusalem which led to a flash flood that swept away the road by the Dead Sea near Masada – fortunately we had done that excursion the previous day!! So it is possible that both Moses and Jesus might have experienced an abundance of H₂O, but that would certainly have been a rarity.

It was no wonder, therefore, that the Israelites who had left Egypt and were now wandering around the Sinai

Peninsula would have been worried about finding a water supply big enough to supply the needs of their whole community.

There was an interesting debate about this story among the classical rabbis – was it a once and for all event which happened on a particular occasion, or did this particular water spouting rock then trundle around the desert with the Israelites for the next 40 years? Having read that I imagined it sprouting legs and walking with them – more Harry Potter than the Bible. Or, for those of you who are fans of the natural history programme 'Spy in the Wild', was it moving among them like 'rock' or 'boulder' cam?

Likewise, the rocky inland hills of Israel are very hot and dry, especially in the summer months. I can imagine Jesus would have needed to 'wet his whistle' after a long day's walking. Wells were precious commodities, carefully guarded by their owners and so he would have needed to seek permission from the locals before drinking – even if they were hated and despised Samaritans.

It is no wonder, therefore, that water becomes such a powerful symbol in the biblical narrative, when quenching your thirst required a major effort – not just a matter of

turning on a tap or opening your bottle of lightly sparkling Malvern spring water purchased at Waitrose!

Water was seen as a sign of God's grace – it was essential for life and must therefore be the gift of the creator of that life for the sustenance of his creation. In the desert the Israelites were shown in a very practical way that they were God's Chosen People, by their deliverance through water, when they crossed the Red Sea, and by the water they were given to drink in the Sinai desert.

Likewise, Jesus' conversation with the Samaritan woman was a reminder that God's grace is not just for his Chosen People, but for all his creation – Jew and gentile, male and female.

But, as they say, familiarity breeds contempt. What we have in abundance we begin to take for granted or, even worse, complain about. Unlike Moses and Jesus who both relished the reviving effect of water in a parched landscape, I have been whinging and moaning about the water hazards I have been encountering on my daily commute over the past few weeks. I haven't appreciated that those sodden fields which have tipped over onto the roads mean that the aquifers below the soil have been

replenished and are ready to provide us with water during the summer months.

And maybe we too take God's grace – his love and care for us – for granted. We are in the middle of Lent – a season for re-appraising our relationship with God through prayer and self-denial. This year with all the worry and uncertainty of a pandemic and what that might mean for each of us personally, it may be hard to detect much of God's grace and love in a world which seems overwhelmed by a natural evil beyond our control. How can a benevolent deity cause such things to happen?

One classic theodicy, an attempt to maintain God's goodness in the face of human suffering, has its roots in the teachings of the second century bishop, Irenaeus. This sees suffering as part of the means by which God helps us to grow and develop as human beings. Not only are we strengthened as people by learning to cope with difficult tasks – a bit like the current educational trend of 'growth mindset', where children are not praised for everything they do, but are encouraged to do push themselves to reach even greater heights in their future endeavours. But the problems other people are facing should enable us to develop our feelings compassion and our ability to

care. As the theologian John Hick put it, borrowing a phrase from the poetry of Keats – we live in a vale of soul-making, a place where we are enabled to develop our ability to reach out to others in need.

There is a word which appears frequently in the Hebrew Bible, *hesed*. There is no English equivalent and so the translators of the King James Bible rendered it as loving-kindness, a tradition which has continued in later English translations of the Bible. It is the word the Israelites used to describe the all-embracing care they felt the God who had chosen their nation showed towards them, regardless of the many trials and tribulations their nation had been through. As we hear or read each new item of news the world we have always taken for granted seems to be becoming a strange place, far from the *hesed* of God which we have taken for granted in more normal times. We are feeling like those thirsty Israelites in the desert who could see little hope of survival with no water available to drink.

Lent is traditionally a time of self-denial, but it should also be a time when we seek to do good for others, to show God's grace to the world in practical ways. Many people may feel frightened and far from God's care at the

moment, but that is the very time when we have to need to be ready to show love for others in whatever ways we can.

The Archbishop of Westminster, Vincent Nicholls, was talking on the Today programme yesterday and he was asked about what churches would do if large scale gatherings of people were banned. One of his responses was that even if people didn't attend mass – and with today's technology church services could be streamed and watched by people in their homes – he hoped that church buildings would remain open. They were large, people could stay in their own space, but he felt that at this time many people, church goers or not, would need places where they could go to pray or reflect. And those prayers – whether said at home or in church – are as important to our well-being at this time as the practical ways with which we should be supporting our neighbours.

As Christians we are recipients of God's grace, the life giving water promised by Jesus to the Samaritan woman. And we have a responsibility to share the love and compassion it gives to us with others, particularly in the difficult times in which we are now living.