

**ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE
WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON**

Sermon

Third Sunday of Lent - 12th March 2023

All Saints' Marseille

The Revd Roxana Tenea Teleman, Curate

How long can someone survive without a drink of water? Around three days, at an average temperature and with no strenuous activity, some experts say. When one is forced to go without water, things can turn unpleasant quickly. The reason is that more than half of our body is water. Thirst, which signals the need to replenish fluids, is, therefore, a crucial reflex.

Like many other people in the Western world, I often take drinking water for granted: I only need open a tap to quench my thirst, and I pour litres of water down the drain every day without much thought about this precious resource. It is easy to overlook the fact that one billion people worldwide lack access to safe drinking water, and nearly three billion experience severe water scarcity at least one month each year.

I have absolute sympathy for the Hebrews on their exhausting journey to God, trudging through the wilderness without water. If I were Moses, I would not hold against them their complaints and quarrels. After all, besides the unpleasantness of having a parched mouth and throat, dehydration affects how the brain works and disrupts one's mood. I can't help but wonder, however, if it wasn't the Hebrew women who urged their fathers, husbands, and sons to approach Moses and complain. Women don't shy away from discussing their vulnerabilities, ailments, and needs. In Moses's time, women and girls were responsible for sourcing water for their families. Even today, women and girls worldwide spend an astounding 200 million hours collectively fetching water - long journeys by foot, often more than once a day, which leaves them exposed to danger and frequently deprives them of education and opportunities to earn a living.

The Hebrews are thirsting in physically hostile territory: thirsting for water, thirsting for the promised land flowing with milk and honey. They are caught between promise and fulfilment, questioning whether God is truly with them.

We've just heard about Jesus who is likewise thirsting in hostile territory. Why did he cross the border into Samaria? His Jewish contemporaries would rather avoid this land because "Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans," as the evangelist explains matter-of-factly. What a euphemism! The one-thousand-year-old animosity between them and the Samaritans is entrenched and bitter. Jews would consider the Samaritans to be apostates from true faith, albeit sharing with them their founding history and part of the Scriptures, as well as the expectation to see the arrival of the Messiah. Both nations, once a family, are caught, each on their own, and against each other, between promise and fulfilment. Both thirst for God's presence. Is God still among them?

It is, therefore, very unusual that Jesus sits by a well, a tired, thirsty, vulnerable outsider, waiting for someone to offer him a drink of water. That person could only be a woman, coming to quench her thirst and collect water for her family. But it is noon, a rather unusual time for someone to fetch water. Whoever might come, she is sure to have good reasons to avoid her fellow townsfolk, and the conversations and gossip that usually happen while drawing water. Jesus, the inappropriate interlocutor, is not shy to initiate contact with the Samaritan woman who comes with her water jar. In so doing, he puts aside prejudices and transgresses cultural, political, and religious boundaries. How often, do you think, we set aside the stereotypes we carry and cross the social and cultural lines we draw, to enter a conversation with an unlikely interlocutor? How often do we listen to God's call to transgress boundaries, break the rules, embrace the stranger?

Even in our times, we might choose to overlook the Samaritan woman once we become aware of her backstory. Many commentators have labelled her as a "fallen" woman, playing on her admission that she's had five husbands. However, there is very little we can know about this woman's story. In Jesus' times, women were not allowed to initiate a divorce, only men had that right, and divorces could occur for a variety of reasons, ranging from childlessness (which was always considered a woman's fault) to unsatisfactory household work. Having had five husbands could mean being widowed for five times. There are any number of ways we might envision this woman's story as tragic rather than scandalous. What we do know is that she prefers to go unnoticed.

She heads to the well in the scorching heat of the day, carrying whatever injury, anxiety, or despair her complicated past has inflicted upon her. She carries the weight of a thirst she cannot yet name.

But then she meets Jesus, who sees her as she truly is, with all her pain, hurt and longing. And he names it all - without any shaming or condemning.

Their conversation is - many have observed this - Jesus' longest conversation the Gospels have recorded. She responds to Jesus in such a way that leads him to reveal his true identity - she is the first person and, moreover, an ethnic and religious outsider, to whom Jesus reveals his identity in John's Gospel. She can now name her deepest thirst: "Give me the living water," and her identity changes: from a shamed and dismissed outsider, to a witness and disciple. She will bring to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ, not one or two people, as Andrew and Philip did, but a whole city - not through a charismatic proclamation, but through honesty about her personal story: "Come and see ... He told me everything I have ever done", and with her own questions: "He cannot be the Messiah, can he?". This is why the Eastern Churches do not abandon the Samaritan woman to obscurity in her city, but give her a name, Photini ("the enlightened one") and celebrate her as a disciple and apostle, one who thirsts for the living water.

Our human condition is to thirst, yet human thirst extends beyond physical water sources. Like the Samaritan woman, we crave the living water that satisfies and refreshes, revives and purifies our very souls. But how long can we go without it?

God does not desire us to shrivel from a parched soul. He longs to quench our deepest needs and longings. In a few weeks, on Good Friday, we will hear Jesus cry out, "I thirst" from the cross: it is not Christ's humanity alone that feels the thirst. It is his divinity too.

As intense as our thirst for God might be, his yearning for us is infinitely deeper. As exhausting as our journeys to God might seem, the journey his Word has taken to become incarnate, breaking barriers and crossing borders, infinitely surpasses them. The stream of living water between God and ourselves is none other than Jesus Christ. We are all invited to partake in this mystery, to drink of this outpouring of love embodied in him. So let us drink deeply and be renewed.

Amen.