**15th March 2020**

**John 4.5-42**

There is really only one story ‘hitting’ the headlines this week – the spread of coronavirus and its implications for human society, both nationally and globally[[1]](#endnote-1).

The daily Star had the headline yesterday showing two football fans sat in an empty football stadium after the football matches have been suspended and the caption said: ‘Scary stuff Dave. Now I’m going to have to talk to the missus’.

Brexit. Poverty, Environmental and ecological concerns are still around – but just for the moment they seem to have been displaced from the headlines. But reflecting on the virus and the response to it, the word ‘isolation’ seems to figure again and again. People are being called to ‘self-isolate’ or are forcibly put into ‘isolation’.

By implication, this makes us think about the nature of ‘communication’ – which seems at one level to be the opposite of ‘isolation’. In many ways we are fortunate these days that such isolation can be mitigated by the use of modern technology, which even the Pope has employed – enabling him to give his traditional Sunday address and blessing over the internet rather than in person! It is something we are looking at here at the Tab and the possibility of live streaming our services. Telephones, skype, facetime, allow us to keep in touch too.

In our Gospel story about the woman at the well who meets Jesus in John 4 [[2]](#endnote-2)– one feature that is often noted is the isolation of the woman. She is drawing her water at noon (the hottest part of the day), probably because of the hostility with which she was treated by her fellow villagers.

The anonymous woman is triply marginalized: a woman in a male-dominated world; an outsider in the eyes of Jews; and a sexually unconventional person to her own community. Collecting water in the heat of the day, rather than early in the morning with the other women, is a sign of her ostracism. This low-status woman embodies the story of her people before this Jewish man: impure because of their mixed race, immoral because of their idolatry, outside the line of descent, traced back to Abraham through King David.

This story reflects the relationships between the evangelist’s community and a marginalized branch of the family of Israel. Samaria, the city of the Samaritans, was 40 miles north of Jerusalem. Their patriarchal origins were obscured by later history; among Jews, that made Samaria a watchword for idolatry and racial impurity.

Jesus engages with her, however. In another deep and meaningful conversation, Jesus hears her concerns about cultural identity and religious authenticity. As with Nicodemus, he seems to speak in riddles at first, but the mention of ‘living (i.e. flowing) water’ leads eventually to its source as God’s gift. Jesus speaks of a coming ‘hour’ – his Passion and exaltation (see 12.23; 13.1) – when worshipping God will no longer be defined by holy places, Jewish or Samaritan. Because God is unconfined ‘Spirit’, Jesus’ hour will open up the realm of ‘spirit’ and ‘truth’ to all who are willing to be born of ‘spirit’ (3.6-8), however they define themselves.

The outsider woman could not be more different from the insider Nicodemus. Coming to Jesus in midday brightness, she senses that he is more than a prophet, perhaps even her people’s messiah, and then heads back to her town. Leaving her water jar behind shows that she now has more pressing concerns, as an evangelist who draws a new audience into her conversation with Jesus. As a result of sharing her story, some of her own people come to meet Jesus and find out for themselves who he is: not merely a Jewish prophet, or the Samaritan messiah, but ‘the Saviour of the world’ who reconciles divided peoples through the Spirit released by his Passion (John 7.37-39; 12.32; 19.34; 20.21-23).

The story’s rich symbolism reveals its surplus of meaning. ‘Spirit’ is more like water than wind in this conversation. Literal and metaphorical waters flow back and forth between the woman and Jesus, and then to her community and back to Jesus. All this is a Samaritan ‘harvest’ that feeds Jesus’ vocation, and whose abundance the disciples – and those who come after, including us – will reap.

In the Old Testament water was a sign of God’s presence. Jesus needed water, and the Samaritan woman provided it. In giving it, she receives a far more precious gift, the living water, an expression of God’s continuing presence. She then shares this with her whole community. Through Jesus, the gift of life and the gift of giving life is available to all.

As a nation, indeed as a world we are in uncertain and anxious times. What does this passage say to us in this situation?

Well our time of isolation may be a time of reflection and getting closer to God. A lot of people live life in a rush and the distractions of life, work, family, their own busyness can stop them from looking at themselves and also looking at the fears, anxieties, insecurities, and where their true hope is. Jesus came to this isolated woman and touched those insecurities and offered her living water, to refresh her soul. As water irrigates the land for crops, living water nourishes lives and communities, bringing purpose, joy and resilience. So, I pray these times of quite may be times to draw from the well of Christ, to be sustained by his presence and promises.

This woman was isolated – yet Jesus broke many rules and taboos to encounter her. The impact of coronavirus encourages us to fear the other person, to keep our distance. Whilst social distancing makes hygienic sense we need to find new ways of communicating and reaching out to others who may feel isolated. Even smiling at people from a distance can help.

The phrase ‘I am’ is significant in the Bible– not least because it seems to allude to the occasion in Exodus 3.14 when God introduces himself as the ‘I am who I am’. The very first time the emphatic ego eimi (I am) is used by Jesus in John’s Gospel is in this week’s story, the meeting between Jesus and the Samaritan woman. It is also the longest dialogue between Jesus and any one individual in any of the Gospels. And after their conversation has ranged widely over living water and holy places, the woman asks about the coming Messiah, and Jesus responds to her saying, ‘I am, the one taking to you’ (John 4.26; literal translation).

This is an ‘I am saying without a predicate’. (A ‘predicate’ in this context means something like ‘the bread of life’, or ‘the true vine’ or ‘the light of the world’.) But actually, there is a predicate, namely ‘the one talking to you’. And it is, I believe, a profound insight to realise that the very first time in this Gospel Jesus ‘claims’ the divine identity of ‘I am’, he does so linking it to such an act of communication. It is obvious if you think about it! After all, at the very beginning of this Gospel, the prologue makes that fundamental link between ‘the Word’ and the incarnation of Jesus Christ. So, it is appropriate that in this week’s story, Jesus discloses his divine identity par excellence because he is the one who communicates with human beings. Jesus tells us that the deepest nature of God is to offer communication and communion to and with human beings.

God is still with us, communicating and communing with us. Now of all times, is an opportunity to draw on the living water.

Lent is a time when the ancient virtue of silence is prized, taking its starting point from Jesus’ own isolation and silence in the wilderness. We will discover over the coming months the relationship between silence and isolation, communion and communication.

May we through all this crisis and fear know the living water of God to sustain us and keep us joyful in Christ.

May all we spread is kindness love and understanding.

**Living Water, facing the Corona virus — Ana Gobledale, UK**

Eternal God, we turn to you knowing you are the source of the living water for which we thirst.

Living water, **In faith, we lift our prayer to you.**

We pray for those, like the woman by the well, confronted by their own reality and being invited to step boldly into the unknown. May they know your direction as they set out on new paths.

Living water, **In faith, we lift our prayer to you.**

We pray for those who isolated in their homes.  For those whose jobs and livelihood are affected, for those who feel afraid about their future. May they know your hope as they travel through darkness.

Living water, **In faith, we lift our prayer to you.**

We pray for those who are ill and those whose relationships are strained. May they know your healing as they pass through pain.

Living water, **In faith, we lift our prayer to you.**

We pray for those who are nearing the end of their earthly life.  May they know your peace as they tread their final steps.  And we pray for  the families of those who have succumbed to the Corona virus.

Living water, **In faith, we lift our prayer to you.**

We pray for our church and for all who are worshipping around the world today. We pray for those whose church doors are closed today, like the people of Italy, that they might connect with one another and you through prayer and song.  We give thanks that technology can help people in isolation stay connected.

Living water, **In faith, we lift our prayer to you.**

This Lent, we, too, feel like we are wandering in the wilderness.  Protect us from temptation.  May every person sense your presence as we journey through these unknown and sometimes frightening experiences.  May we remain calm and act responsibly, under your guiding hand.

Living water, **In faith, we lift our prayer to you.**

We pray for nations finding their path through this complicated and challenging period.  May leaders know your wisdom as they discern the way ahead.

Living water, **In faith, we lift our prayer to you.**

We pray for one another and everyone on our hearts, beloved and stranger.  May we know your love every step and every day.  May we drink deeply of the water of life you offer, so that our nourishment and strength come from you.

Living water, **In faith, we lift our prayer to you.**

These are the prayers of your faithful people.

1. Dr Clare Amos <https://www.rootsontheweb.com/lectionary/2020/106-march-april-2020-a/lent-3/postscript> [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. <https://www.rootsontheweb.com/lectionary/2020/106-march-april-2020-a/lent-3/bible-notes> [↑](#endnote-ref-2)