

Third Sunday in Lent**15 March 2020**

Exodus 17. 1-7	Water from the rock
Psalms 95	Call to worship and obedience
Romans 5.1-11	Justified by faith
John 4.5-42	Jesus and the woman of Samaria

Help us , O Lord, to read and to understand your word, and to live according to your commandments.

It won't happen this year, but for centuries there has been a ceremony in the Forum in Rome, in the ruins of the so-called Temple of Caesar, every year, on this day, to commemorate the murder of Julius Caesar on the Ides of March, 2064 years ago. The killers aimed to stop the Roman Republic becoming an autocratic empire, but the killing only led to the empire coming sooner, and becoming even more autocratic than it might have been under Julius.

In his account of the killing, Shakespeare has one of the citizens say, *I fear a worse will come in his place*. And one did. Four years later, on the anniversary of Caesar's death, Octavian had more than 300 of the men who had fought against him publicly executed in the forum.

These events gave the Ides of March a bad name -- before 44 BC it had been the date of an important Roman religious festival; afterwards it was a date on which bad things were expected to happen.

In 1877 15th March was the first day of the first-ever cricket test between Australia and England, which **was** a disaster, for England. The colonials won by 45 runs. In 1939 15th March was the day Hitler invaded Czechoslovakia, the first act of the Second World War. On this day last year, a deranged Australian killed 51 people and injured 49 more in an attack on a mosque in Christchurch. So, be careful today, whatever you do!

In the early church, this third Sunday in Lent was known as *Scrutiny Sunday*, because on this day the elders began to examine the catechumens, who were preparing to be baptised on Easter Sunday night. And, of course, Lent is a good time for us to examine ourselves, and honestly face up to how well or how badly we have kept the great commandments, to love God and to love one another.

This year, the Gospel readings for Lent record Jesus' personal encounters with a variety of people. On the first Sunday of Lent, Jesus' encounter with the devil in the wilderness; last Sunday, Jesus' encounter with Nicodemus; today, Jesus' encounter with the woman of Samaria; next Sunday, Jesus' encounter with a blind man; the Sunday after, Jesus and Lazarus; the Sunday after that, Jesus and the people of Jerusalem, Palm Sunday, the beginning of Holy Week.

The Devil defeated, Nicodemus inspired, the woman accepted, the blind man healed, Lazarus brought back to life. John's gospel also gives us other inspiring stories of Jesus' encounters with a variety of other people – the disciples called, the temple merchants shamed, the hungry fed, an adulterous woman pardoned, humanity redeemed, Thomas's faith restored . . . in every case, evil gives way to good, and this can be the pattern of our own encounter with Jesus.

In a moment we'll consider what we might learn from the report of Jesus' meeting with the Samaritan woman at the well, but let's not forget, as we often do, what we can learn from the other passages on today's reading sheet.

[Exodus] Our first reading is a reminder that human nature never changes – some people always want more, and then more. A few weeks before, the children of Israel had crossed the Red Sea to end centuries of slavery, often brutal slavery. Their freedom had been won. Ever since, they had been quarrelling among themselves and flailing their elderly leaders, Moses and Aaron: *Why did you bring us out of Egypt to kill us?* An absurd charge. Moses was 80 years old, Aaron was 83, they could do nothing to help, except call upon God for deliverance. And God had delivered, providing the people with water and food for the journey.

With this history, you would expect the people to trust God for the future. But no, when there is another threat, the people do not turn to God, they turn **on** their leaders, again, and again God delivers them by showing their leaders how to find life-giving water in the rocks.

When people face crises, like bushfires and droughts and floods and epidemics, it is easy for them to say *Where is God?* and to blame their leaders, and attribute wrong motives to their actions. Instead, we should be trusting in God, and praying that he will lead the leaders of the nations to find solutions to their people's problems.

[Psalm] The rock of Rephidim was proven to be a rock of salvation for the children of Israel and this is remembered in the great psalm we sang together.

It is remembered in history as well – in 1956 President Nasser went to the Egyptian air force base at Rephidim and announced he was about to close the Straits of Tiran to Israeli shipping. This action precipitated the second Arab-Israeli war. In 1967, the Israelis seized the base, and stationed some of its air force there, and the base became crucial in winning Israel's third war with the Arab powers. Once again Rephidim was proven to be a rock of salvation for the Jewish people.

The psalm calls on God's people to sing, to worship and to listen – it is a call to worship and obedience, in contrast to the Exodus story of continuing ingratitude and unbelief.

[Romans] Our New Testament reading takes us from physical salvation to spiritual salvation, in Paul's long, tortuous discussion of what it means for us to be justified by faith in Jesus, and to begin the process of sanctification, which is the road to the heavenly Jerusalem.

The first paragraph, the first five verses, remind us of the saving benefits which justification brings -- we have peace with God, we have direct access to God, our heavenly king, and we have joy in the love of God, in spite of the setbacks in our lives – for Paul's first hearers these included the sufferings of the Roman persecution.

The second paragraph, the next six verses, remind us of the enormity of Christ's self-offering – Paul tells us that Christ died for the ungodly, for sinners, for us, to save us from the wrath of God.

Many of us are uncomfortable with this kind of language – we think we are pretty good people, nice people, and, unlike most of our neighbours, we are in church, praising God and sharing in the remembrance of Christ's death and resurrection which we call the Eucharist, the Thanksgiving, or the Holy Communion. We prefer to speak of God's love rather than of God's wrath, which is like talking about one side of a coin as if the coin had only one side.

This is nothing new – theologians have been arguing about the link between God's love and God's wrath since the end of the second century, when they began to digest the Biblical witness to both. We tend to think of God's love and God's wrath as giant-size versions of human love and human anger, yet both are unique expressions of his unique Divine nature, which we cannot fully understand or properly express. You might like to read the essay on the web which is noted in *Connections*, under the picture of Jacob's Well -- it covers the topic well.

<https://www.uniontheology.org/resources/doctrine/god/the-wrath-of-god-as-an-aspect-of-the-love-of-god>

Finally, let's come back to Jesus and the woman at the well, and to us. Israel is a dry land. Today more than half of the country's drinking water comes from the sea. Since 1964 Israel has built five major desalination plants and more than 30 smaller ones around its coasts.

In ancient times people depended on wells. The village well became the village social centre, as it still is in many rural societies. This well was special, because it was believed to be on the land which Jacob bought for his family and his flocks, near the city of Shechem. Originally it was beside a large rock, and was more than 60 metres deep. The first church was built over the well in the 3rd C, but the well is now in the crypt of a modern Greek orthodox monastery church, completed only 13 years ago. It is now only about 20 metres deep, around 65 feet, because it is filled with stones and other debris dropped in by pilgrims over more than 1 800 years.

We've all heard many sermons based on this famous story, I've preached a few myself, but I have no notes from any of them, so I was happy to have to start again. What does the record of Jesus'

personal encounter with the Samaritan woman tell us about Jesus' encounter with us, or the encounter he wants to have with us, and with all people? At least three significant things, which I've noted in *Connections* – the story shows that Jesus **Includes, Accepts, and Reveals**.

For the disciples, the most remarkable thing about Jesus' long talk with the woman was simply that it happened – there were at least four reasons why, by the norms of Jewish society at the time, it should not have happened – devout Jewish men did not have private conversations with women they did not know, Jews and Samaritans were divided by mutual hostility and suspicion, the woman had had five husbands, when the Rabbinic limit was three, and she was now living with another man without going to the bother and expense of another marriage.

Yet Jesus **included** her in his circle – he even stayed in her village for two days, which must have shocked his disciples profoundly. Sadly, the church has often excluded people who did not fit the model of the devout – in the Spanish colonies, indigenous people were generally not allowed into the nave of the church, they had to stand in the outside colonnades looking in; in the English colonies, convicts and slaves generally had to sit at the back; some congregations still exclude homosexual men or menstruating women, some divide between the well-off and the not-so-well-off. Jesus includes everyone – even us.

Even more shocking, Jesus **accepted** a drink from this woman, defying the convention that Jews and Samaritans do not use the same drinking vessels. The convention became law in Judaea a few years later, in 65 or 66, only months before the Jewish state was extinguished in a bloody rebellion. Yet, in many parts of India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, for example, Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs and Christians do not use the same wells or drink from the same cups because of religious discrimination. Only a few months ago a Pakistani woman was released after nine years in solitary confinement as a result of an argument with women of another religion at the village well.

Most shocking of all, perhaps, for the disciples, was that, to this foreign woman, Jesus **revealed** himself as the Messiah, the greater than Moses, the one who could satisfy his people with living water, the Holy Spirit of God. The gospels record that Jesus often told his disciples not to proclaim that he was the anointed one, the Christ – in a big crowd, with the priests and the Roman soldiers standing by, that could start a dangerous disturbance, but here, as Jesus got close and personal with this woman, he revealed himself fully, and she ran joyfully back to the village to share the good news with her family and friends.

What does this tell us? -- that Jesus' love knows no boundaries, everyone is included, everyone is accepted, and everyone is given the opportunity to know him and love him and serve him. That is worth saying to everyone, 'Come and see'. 'Come and see'. Thanks be to God.

For Connections

Jesus INCLUDES – ACCEPTS - REVEALS



Jacob's Well, Nablus, West Bank – today in the crypt of the Greek Orthodox church of St Philomena, completed in 2007.

<https://www.uniontheology.org/resources/doctrine/god/the-wrath-of-god-as-an-aspect-of-the-love-of-god>