

Havant Lent 3 yr A 8 a.m.

John 4.5-42

In this wonderful story of the Samaritan woman at the well, we meet Jesus both as a thirsty traveller who needs a drink and who will of course need to drink again, and as God himself who offers an inexhaustible supply of water.

It's not surprising that this story occurs only in St John's gospel, because it is John above all who wants to stress this double nature of Christ as both human and divine. You remember how at the very beginning in chapter 1 he speaks of the Word who was in the beginning who was with God and who was God, and who became flesh and dwelt among us.

Only a Jesus who knew hunger and thirst and weariness could be a real companion for us who get hungry, tired and thirsty. And so it is that he sits down on the edge of a well in Samaria and asks a local woman for a drink. As St John tells us, this was itself quite surprising. According to ordinary standards of the time, a man would not usually approach a woman he did not know in such a direct way, and in any case Jews and Samaritans tried to avoid contact with each other, even if Jacob who had provided this particular well was in fact the common ancestor of them both. It was moreover, we are told, the sixth hour, that is midday - itself a surprising detail as most people would be indoors at the time and in any case water collecting was normally at sunrise or sunset. So St John has set the scene for a dramatic encounter. It is made all the worse, when later on we discover that the woman in question had a somewhat chequered past and present!

Taken simply at the level of a human story, it all starts straightforwardly enough. Jesus is sitting thirsty at the edge of the well, when a woman arrives to draw water. He asks her for a drink. She is surprised at the request, for the reasons I have explained.

Her reaction, however, gives Jesus the opportunity to turn the meeting into something much more than simply a matter of quenching natural thirst. In fact, he turns the situation round completely. No longer is it a matter of the unnamed woman giving Jesus a drink, but rather of his promising her a source of water that will never dry up. But this leads to a certain misunderstanding. "Living water" means fresh flowing water as opposed to stagnant water in

a tank or cistern. A constant supply of fresh water would be a wonderful gift for a community, so it's not surprising she leaps at the idea, incredible though it may seem, that Jesus was going to provide them with an alternative and far better water source.

So far it seems we are still very much the level of the human Jesus. But of course, he has a very different purpose in this conversation. Jesus wants to lead the woman from thinking about everyday water, whether flowing or stagnant, and about human thirst, to recognising that even as human beings we have deeper needs than physical thirst. We have been made for a life that will not ultimately need ordinary water at all and we have a thirst that can only be quenched from a supernatural spring. Jesus alone can give that living water because he is not only our human brother but also our divine Lord. And he is of course the giver of both earthly and heavenly water

What is especially wonderful about all this is that whereas we have to drink earthly water repeatedly from an external source as we continue to get thirsty however often we drink it, the spring of water that Jesus himself provides is no longer outside us. His grace and presence in our lives mean that it is flowing through us all the time. Sometimes it can feel almost overwhelming, but even when it is running underground, like a hidden river, it is filling the aquifers of our soul and watering our faith.