

St. Ninian's Parish Church
Sunday 15th March 2020
Exodus 17: 1 – 7; John 4: 5 - 42

There was a young man, very charismatic, Jewish, confident, popular, surrounded by friends, who arrived one day from out of town. They were all travelling, and they were hungry and thirsty. His friends left him by the well when he told them to go and buy food in town. On their way without him by their side, they started talking, gossiping, about their journey with him. A young local-woman overheard the commotion, the Galilean accents. She looked up.

She caught sight of all these Galilean boys, but her eyes lingered on the young man in the distance beside the well, 'a Jewish boy,' she thought, 'from out of town'; forbidden fruit. 'Oh, I am thirsty, I'll just go and get some water from the well. Now, where's my jar. He might help me draw my water when I get there.'

The story we read this morning from the Gospel about the meeting between Jesus and a Samaritan woman beside a well is a boy meets girl story. Is that too much to say? Would it be too much, too daring, to sacrilegious to say that this story about Jesus and the Samaritan woman is a boy meets girl story that is dripping with sexual tension? Should Church of Scotland ministers be suggesting that kind of thing from the pulpit?

I don't need to suggest that this is a boy meets girl story dripping in sexual tension because anyone who knows their Bible stories well would recognise exactly what was going on at the well between Jesus and the Samaritan woman, for their encounter is a common one in the Old Testament.

In the book of Genesis in chapter 24, the Old Testament Patriarch Isaac meets his wife to be, Rebekah, at a well. Verse 11 of Genesis chapter 24 begins that story, 'And Isaac made the camels kneel outside the city by the well of water at eventide, the hour when the water-drawing women come out.' This story of Isaac meeting Rebekah is the first of many stories in the Old Testament where a couple meet at a well and end up marrying. All these stories follow a similar pattern of storytelling. They are called betrothal-type stories.

The Old Testament theologian, translator and commentator Robert Alter puts it best. I'm going to quote his commentary on Isaac's encounter with Rebekah in Genesis chapter 24 in full, and intersperse it with parallels from the story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman. Robert Alter says,

This is the first occurrence of the betrothal-type scene. The conventionally fixed sequence of motifs of this type-scene is: travel to a foreign land (*check, Jesus travels to Samaria*), encounter there with a future bride at a well, drawing water (*check, Jesus encounters a woman at a well drawing water*), she hurries or runs to bring news of the strangers arrival (*check, when the disciples return she goes off to tell the people about Jesus*), a feast at which a betrothal engagement is agreed (*check, the disciples return with food*).¹

If you were an observant Jew living in the 1st century, or any century, it would be impossible not to see in the encounter between Jesus and the Samaritan woman, a boy meets girl story for this reads like an Old Testament betrothal-type story. Personally, I don't think you need to know your Old Testament stories well to recognise what is going on here, you just need to know something about life; the sexual tension between these two is dripping off the page.

¹ Alter R, *The Hebrew Bible* volume 1 (2019), p. 79

This story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman is a boy meets girl story. But, the twist in the story is that the expected conclusion of events, boy marries girl, doesn't happen. Instead, the story takes an unexpected turn for both the Samaritan woman and the reader. The story is a set-up, and both she and we are expected to fall in to its trap.

When two attractive young people are engaged in a conversation, they are often not talking about the thing that they are talking about.

'Give me a drink.'

'Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep.'

'Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty.'

'Sir, give me this water...'

What can they be possibly be talking about?

Then, just at that point when the woman and we, the readers, might think the emerging relationship between these two people is going to go a certain way - that they are going to stop talking about water and start talking about what they are really talking about - Jesus takes the conversation in another, unexpected direction,

'Go, call your husband...'

'I have no husband.'

'You are right ... for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband.'

'Sir, I see that you are a prophet.'

This handsome Jewish boy is not like the other men, his gaze lingers on her soul.

Like us today, as I'll describe later, and like the Hebrews in the Exodus story, the Samaritan woman – with both her thirst and her husbands – thinks that life is all about finding a way to take care of our physical and material needs. Like so many people then and now, she thought that if we have a roof over our heads, food on our tables, water in our jugs, and a partner in our bed, then that's all we need to get by, to survive, to live.

That's what she thought, it's what the Hebrews in the Exodus story that we read thought as well, and it is what people today also think. Nonsense, said Jesus to her back-then, and to us today, you need a lot more than just your physical and material needs met to live life in all its fullness, 'Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty.'²

Satisfying our physical and material needs, although important, is not the key to salvation, to living in the Kingdom of God, to living a fulfilled life. Our material and physical needs are all perishable, says Jesus, they come and go. To experience life fully, to experience salvation, we need more than just a roof over our heads, food and water on the table, and a partner in our beds.

On their journey from slavery in Egypt to the Promised Land, a story recounted in the Book of Exodus from which we read a part this morning, the Hebrews also learned this lesson. On the edge of the wilderness, on their way to freedom, the people threatened to return to slavery unless Moses satisfied their physical needs.

Stuck for what to do Moses turned to God for help, and God provided water for their thirst in order to keep them on the road to the Promised Land. If the only thing that was important was the satisfaction of their physical needs, the Hebrews could have remained in slavery. But,

² John 4: 13 - 14

the transformation from slavery to freedom required not just the satisfaction of their physical needs – water to drink and food to eat, it required a faith in God who would save them.

Like the Samaritan woman and the Hebrews in the wilderness we too can remain as slaves to our material and physical desires, but if we want to live a fulfilled life, if we want salvation and to be set free like the Hebrews, then we also need a transformation that is more spiritual than physical. We are on a journey during Lent from slavery to freedom, from brokenness to wholeness, from death to life. This journey is not about meeting our physical and material needs so that we can live, it is about setting us free spiritually so that we can live in all its fullness.

This spiritual transformation might be something we can recognise in these worrying days. The Government's advice has been clear and simple, and it will be clear and simple too when it changes. Not so the response of many Britons and others around the world, who in the face of what appears to be to them a worrying crisis immediately try to ensure that their physical and material needs are met by stripping the supermarket shelves of bottled water, tinned food, pasta, cleaning products and toilet rolls amongst other things.

Some Britons are going further. Over the course of the past month one group called Coronavirus Preppers – Raw Survival has seen a 25% increase in membership. Membership of Raw survival groups offer advice on how to survive Armageddon, and they sell products to help you follow that advice. Anticipating societal collapse, such groups will sell you crossbows with telescopic sights, 12-hour ration packs and ultraviolet lights to fit above your door mats to kill germs arriving on your mail. You can download recipes from the Dark Ages such as pottage, a vegetable stew. If you have money to burn you can spend £425 on three month's supply of food that will last 25 years. Over the past month orders have risen a hundred-fold.

Of course, it is important to drink, eat and keep clean, but panic buying and apocalypse planning in order to meet your anticipated physical and material needs in the face of Covid-19 is not going to save anyone; you cannot buy enough food and water to protect you from the virus. However, there are some things that can help, and apart from soap and hand sanitiser, few of these things are physical or material. The list of what we need to live life in all its fullness during an outbreak of a virus includes things like: staying calm; trust in those who know what they are talking about; listening to advice and following it; a non-judgemental attitude to those who catch the virus; mutual support; consideration for others; a plan to entertain yourself if you self-isolate, and don't forget to wash your hands, and don't touch your face.

Apart from the soap, none of these things are material or physical. We might call them spiritual. Non-judgemental might be forgiveness, trust might be faith, consideration for others might be love. That doesn't mean that material needs should be ignored, if you self-isolate you need somewhere to do it, and something to eat and drink. But, in China those who coped best when quarantined weren't those with the most food, they were those who developed the best strategies to cope with the isolation.

One such piece of spiritual advice in America given to those who self-isolate is to buy a bottle of whisky and some shortbread; not because whisky and shortbread are nutritious foods that will meet our physical needs, but because they are treats that will help people to enjoy isolation more; treats meet our spiritual needs not our physical ones.

Many people in the world don't have enough to eat and drink, and if they want life in all its fullness they need their material needs met, but there will never be enough bread and water in the world to enable us to live freely a life in all its fullness. There are many people in their

teens and twenties who think they don't get enough sex to live well, but there will never be enough sex in anyone's life to enable people to feel they live a truly fulfilled life.

If you want to live in all its fullness, saved, free, in the kingdom of God then you need spiritual transformation: a spiritual relationship of love with God, yourself and your neighbour.