

Sermon for Sunday 8 March 2026 – The Third Sunday in Lent

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Exodus 17.1-7; Psalm 95; Romans 5.1-11; John 4.5-42

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Please do be seated.

What does it mean to thirst? What does it mean to be thirsty? We all understand the benefits of a nice cup of tea after we've done a few hours hard slog in the garden, don't we? We all know the benefits of a nice, cool, refreshing glass of white wine after a few hours of hard work sunbathing on the beach. But thirst isn't just a physical thing, is it? Thirst can be a spiritual thing, too. And the readings that we've heard today use the illustration of physical thirst to show us what it means to be spiritually thirsty, and that the person who refreshes our spiritual thirst is Christ Jesus.

So in our first reading today, we heard about the people of Israel who are embarked upon their 40-year journey through the wilderness from Egypt to the promised land. And it's a long, hard slog through that desert land. I recently read a book about the British Eighth Army in North Africa in the desert at the Battle of El Alamein. The writer describes what it's like to be in the wilderness. Searingly hot days, freezing cold nights, sand that gets into everything, eyes, ears, nose, the throat, and the constant irritation of thousands of flies buzzing around you all the time, and how desperately the soldiers needed a drink in those conditions. So we can understand what it was like for the people of Israel in the promised land. And talking of war, of course, our news feeds are full at the moment of images of war and of our global spiritual thirst for peace and for our prayer that we might have some global leadership with the courage and example of Christ Jesus.

So the Israelites are pessimistic, fed up, because they remember the cool waters of the Nile and the fresh bread and the delicious fruits and vegetables of Egypt. And they forget that when they were there, they were slaves, that under the hot sun, they were forced to make bricks, whipped and humiliated and beaten. They were thirsty in Egypt for freedom, the freedom to worship God, a spiritual thirst, because while they'd been physically alive in Egypt, they'd been spiritually dead. But now in the desert, in the wilderness, spiritual freedom looks too much like hard work. And they grumble and they complain about God and the fact that they're going to die of thirst.

And Moses strikes the rock in the wilderness and water springs out at this place called Meribah. And in the scriptures and in the story of salvation, Meribah is a place where... It's remembered as the place where everybody moans and complains about God. Meribah is the place where

when we get fed up, that's what this story is about, and about how the rock of our salvation is the one who refreshes us with living water. So Jesus himself endured the wilderness.

The new Moses, his 40 days in the wilderness echo the 40 years of the Israelites. At the beginning of lent, two weeks ago, we were reminded of how the devil tempted him to jump off the highest point of the temple. The devil tempts Jesus with a temptation which really is spiritual first. Impress people, show them you're clever, show them that you are God, show them that you depend on God. And you remember that Jesus replied, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test'. So the Israelites did test God, Jesus did not. And so because Jesus did not test God, he qualifies as the new Moses, the one who will lead the new people of God, the Church, through the wilderness to salvation.

Jesus meets our spiritual hunger and our spiritual thirst. He says, 'Come to me all who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest for your souls'. So how does he do that? How does Jesus quench our thirst? We had a very long reading this morning from St John's Gospel. At Jacob's well in the land of Samaria, Jesus meets a lonely woman. The lonely woman could, I guess, be any one of us. And you will have heard before how Jews and Samaritans were not on good terms and still are not. They had different religious ideas and traditions and had absolutely had nothing to do with each other. They hated each other. So Jesus is here because it's a shortcut between Jerusalem and Galilee to go through Samaria. But a woman and a man didn't speak in public if they weren't married to each other. And certainly a Jewish rabbi did not speak to a Samaritan woman. Scandalous. The story doesn't tell us just how scandalous and shocking this encounter is. But Jesus engages this woman in conversation.

Her literal thirst is that she's come to draw water. She needs water for the day's usual tasks, drinking, cooking, washing. And she would carry her water home in a big clay jar that she would balance on her shoulder or perhaps even on her head. We can imagine that water jar being a really heavy burden that would be something very difficult to carry in the heat of the day. The story tells us that it is midday. We know from the song, don't we, that only mad dogs and Englishmen go out in the midday sun. But this woman has come in the heat of the day to gather water. Why didn't she come when everybody else did in the cool of the day, first thing in the morning? We can assume that this woman's not allowed to join polite society. She seems to have had a bit of a colourful lifestyle, or maybe we should say an abusive lifestyle. We learned that she's had five husbands and is now on man number six. To paraphrase Oscar Wilde, to lose one husband may be regarded as misfortune; to lose five begins to look like carelessness. But we can imagine, can't we, that her life and her experiences have burdened her with burdens that are as heavy as the jar that she is carrying.

So weary, rejected, lonely, spiritually thirsty, would seem to be appropriate ways of describing this woman. And yet Jesus doesn't see her like that. Knowing her, seeing into her soul, understanding her, Jesus reaches out in love and compassion by talking to her, somebody in this world who he would never, in polite society or by human expectation, engage with. But Jesus shows how God sees her, not as how the world sees her. So he asks her for a drink of water to satisfy his physical thirst. But he really does so in order that he can talk to her about her spiritual thirst, and he promises to her water that will be a spring that will gush up to eternal life. It's very hard to understand. The woman doesn't understand what he's talking about. What is Jesus talking about? He's talking about the spiritual refreshment that can only be found in the mercy and the grace of God. And Jesus demonstrates what that grace looks like by asking for a glass of water. So in other words, God is willing to receive from this lowest of low in human terms, he's willing to receive what she can offer to him, even if it only is a glass of water.

The normal experience of her life is the rejection that she receives when the disciples turn up. They don't say anything. They're not brave enough to say anything, but we're told what they were thinking, what on earth is Jesus doing talking to her? Does he not know who she is? Well, astonishingly, the encounter with Jesus transforms her. And she, rather than being burdened, coming reluctantly with a heavy weight to this well in the heat of the day, she's raised up and she rushes back into town as the most unlikely evangelist. 'Come and see this man who's told me everything that I've ever done.' And her performance must have been very convincing and persuasive and a lively performance, because many other Samaritans come out of the town to listen to Jesus. It's a story that reminds me of Mary Magdalene on the first Easter day. She, too, a woman who, by tradition, was rejected and unloved by this world, but raised up by Jesus, and he chooses Mary Magdalene to tell the disciples that he has risen. In both stories, Jesus chooses is the least likely person to be the one who tells the world about his love for them and about his spirit that transforms and refreshes us.

On Good Friday soon, we will remember the death of Jesus on the cross. And one of the seven words that Jesus speaks on the cross as he hangs dying is, 'I thirst.' He was indeed physically parched, hanging so painfully on the cross in the heat of the day. So we can understand why he was thirsty. But his words go much deeper than that. One of the other phrases, one of the other words that Jesus speaks on the cross is, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' The two go together. His thirst is because on the cross, he experienced the full reality of feeling separated from the love of God. Spiritual thirst that sometimes the world would crush us with. You are unlovable, you are unforgivable, you are unacceptable. Why would anybody want anything to do with you? Why do human beings hate each other so much that they would throw missiles at each other? Why would they go to war with each other? Why do we do those things?

And in answer, St Paul writes to the Romans, 'God proves his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for for us.'

But Jesus showed God's love when he asked for a drink from one of the world's unhappy victims, one who fell down because of what other humans are capable of doing to each other. And in asking her for a drink, he begins a conversation that raises her up. At the last supper, Jesus says to his disciples, when he raises the cup, 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, drink this, remember me, whenever you drink it.' And in so doing, he gives to his disciples physical refreshment, but also spiritual refreshment to remind us that Jesus is with us, that he loves us, that nothing can separate us, as St. Paul writes, from the love of God. So when we come to the Eucharist today, we come with the burdens that we carry, and we receive in the bread and the wine of the Eucharist, the refreshment of the love of Christ Jesus for us, refreshment that is for us, water gushing up for eternal life. In our journey this Lent, may we pray together the words of the Samaritan woman, 'Give me this water that I may never be thirsty.' Amen.