

SERMON for Lent 3 – March 12, 2023.

Readings: Exodus 17: 1-7; Psalm 95; Romans 5: 1-11 and John 4: 5-42.

There is something about 'Hope' which has always been important to me, that has been like a big aspiration, a big sign which has continued to draw me onward.

Paul in 1 Corinthians 13:13 says:

And now faith, hope and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.

Yes, but oh, how important is hope!

I was, am, a great Tolkein geek, and when the Lord of the Rings trilogy came out, I read and reread the books which I had read 25+ years before. I watched the films again and again, bought the extended versions, reinstated my deep love of the character of Aragorn (who I first fell in love with when I was 17) and thought I was in heaven!

There is a scene in the second film, *The Two Towers*, where Aragorn knowing what is to come, tries to give some confidence to a young lad, Haleth, on the eve of battle, knowing that thousands upon thousands of the evil Orcs are on their way. Haleth says to Aragorn:

They say that it is hopeless.

and Aragorn's response:

There is always Hope.

There is always hope!

Today we have another assortment of readings full of promise, full of rabbit holes to go exploring!

At first glance, beside the reading from Exodus and Psalm 95, there doesn't seem an obvious connection between the readings, and yet, they are filled with the underlying themes of sin, grace, water - the lack of and the refreshment it brings – and also, hope.

In the Old Testament reading we have part of the story of the Israelites wandering in the wilderness. The Israelites have run out of water, and their complaints have reached fever-pitch and Moses has had enough. God leads him to a place and after striking the rock, water comes out and Moses calls the place Massah and Meribah.

The psalmist records God's frustration with his people. After a wonderful start to the psalm of praising our God, we hear the warning: "Do not harden your hearts as at Meribah: as on that day at Massah in the wilderness ..."

And so that generation would perish in the wilderness, and not even Moses would enter the Promise Land, yet the next generation would.

This morning's gospel story is also jammed packed with information, that there would be countless sermons one could preach about the significance of the different aspects of it.

British theologian, Tom Wright, suggests it's like a verbal version of one of those 'what's wrong with this picture' scenarios.

Jesus and the disciples are on their way back to Galilee from Judea and take the route through Samaria. It is midday and, the disciples presumably go off into the city in search of food, while Jesus sits and rests at the well. A woman approaches the well to gather water. Jesus asks for a drink then there ensues a discussion on, amongst other things, water.

So, what's wrong with this picture?

Well, to begin with, it was against the custom and strict social laws for a man to speak to a woman who was not of his household, especially in public.

Jesus was already known as a holy man, leading a movement to bring Israel back to God. So, being seen alone with a woman, let alone speaking with her, would have been considered beyond shocking, and we see, later on in this passage, the reaction of the disciples when they return to Jesus and find him speaking with her.

Next, we have the issue of the great enmity between the Jews and Samaritans. Ever since the Jews had returned from exile in Babylon, they had looked down on the Samaritans as some sort of half breed, mongrel race for which (as you can imagine) the Samaritans resented the Jews.

Normally the Jews would have nothing to do with the Samaritans, besides travelling swiftly through Samaria enroute between Galilee and Judea as travellers were sometimes attacked on that road. There was an alternate route along the Jordan Valley and up to Jerusalem via Jericho.

Yet here again, Jesus is not only speaking with her but asks her for a drink of water. Another shocker, because of the strict food rules Jews observed, forbidding them to eat with non-Jews.

Another curiosity is that the woman was collecting water in the middle of the day, rather than first thing in the morning with the other women. Many have stated that this points to the fact that the woman was obviously of bad character, a terrible sinner.

As the story unfolds, we learn that she has had five husbands and “the one you have now is not your husband”.

Yet it is of this woman Jesus asks a drink of water. As we heard, after some time in conversation with Jesus, her life has changed. So changed that she who was shunned goes back to her community with the news that she thinks she has found the Messiah and through that brings transformation to her community!

Such is God’s transforming grace, such is the hope which Jesus brings.

Paul’s statement as he writes to the church in Rome which he is hoping to visit, comes to mind:

God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us”. (Romans 5: 8).

Jesus asked a woman, shunned by her own community for a drink and her life was transformed.

She may not know exactly what he is talking about, but she wants to know more. She is now the thirsty one. Having been trapped in her life as it was, her encounter with Jesus has changed her, and now she has become the first evangelist to the Samaritan people. Before Jesus’ own disciples can say anything, she tells her community that Jesus is the Messiah. So transformed is she, that they come to see for themselves.

As you know, I like to travel through Lent with the words of God from the Mount of Transfiguration ringing in my ears “This is my Son, the beloved, with whom I am well pleased. **Listen to him!**”

Listen to him. What is Jesus trying to say to us through our readings today?

In today’s rather confusing, concerning, challenging times, how do we “Listen to him”?

Today, when we will be gathering for Annual Meeting in about 2 hours, what is Jesus saying to us?

Many of us are facing difficult situations, surgeries, test results, an uncertain future, broken relationships – what will we take, what comfort do we find in today’s readings?

One of my favourite passages from Paul's letter to the Romans is in the passage we have today:

... we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us. [Romans 5: 2b-5]

In our sufferings we find resilience through our faith. Resilience to endure and get through any suffering, any crisis. Moses did in our first reading, Paul's life after his conversion was one drama after another, this Samaritan woman, no matter what her circumstance, God, through Jesus, restores her and offers her hope.

The second part of my personal Lenten discipline, this year, is, having 'listened to him, what then does the Lord require of me.

So, besides 'doing justice, loving kindness and walking humble with God' [Micah 6:8], what am I being called to do?

To break down the barriers which exclude through prejudice, misunderstanding, injustice? To encourage those who are suffering, that through their endurance and 'character building' journey, they may come to a place of hope, enfolded in the love of God, through the power of the Holy Spirit.

No matter what the future holds, if we can hold on to our faith, we hold on to that and listen for God's voice, there is hope – always - there is hope.

In Jesus' name. Amen.

Revd Sally Buckley
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Acknowledgment:

Tom Wright, *John for Everyone*.