

Sunday 12<sup>th</sup> March 2023

Exodus 17:1-7

Romans 5:1-11

John 4:5-42

There has been much in the news this week about refugees, particularly those who try to cross the English Channel in boats to claim asylum in this country. But I guess few people – if anyone – could have predicted that the Government's hard line announcements on Tuesday would result in Match of the Day being taken off our TV schedules come Saturday. What a strange world we live in.

The sad thing is though that by the end of the week the news is all about Gary Lineker being suspended from the BBC rather than the issues Lineker was expressing views about.

People quote all manner of figures about the numbers of refugees claiming asylum, making many comparisons with other countries. I don't know what the true figures are, so I am not going to get into a debate about those numbers. In any case the numbers can hide the real issues. As a follower of Jesus I would tend to make my decisions by thinking about what would Jesus do.

It is perhaps true that we should be a bit wary of suggesting Government policy be decided upon in this way, but as followers of Jesus we can and should gauge our own thoughts and opinions on the matter on what Jesus might do. So what in this situation would he do?

*In our midweek communion at St James this week the Gospel reading was Jesus' story of the rich man and Lazarus. I expect you know the story (summarise).*

*The message of Jesus' story is clear to me and is directly relevant to the situation we are in. Whatever the current economic pressures we are facing, in comparison with those coming across the channel in just what they are standing up in we are rich.*

And here in today's gospel we have him talking to and accepting another person who is on the margins. Someone else who is not like him. Someone most of his peers would avoid.

Perhaps we need to understand some of the background of life in Palestine to help us see what's going on in the story. The Samaritans were a religious grouping that, like the Jews, traced their origin back to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob

and Joseph. They were part of the Northern kingdom of Israel when Judah in the South and Israel in the north split.

At the time of Jesus the Samaritan people occupied the land between Galilee in the North and Jerusalem. The Jews hated and mistrusted the Samaritans, and had as little to do with them as possible. Many Jews travelling from Galilee to Jerusalem would take the longer route via the Jordan and Jericho rather than travel through Samaritan territory. But in this story, Jesus has clearly decided to pass through their land.

So here he is, at a well in Samaria. A woman approaches the well to draw water, and he asks for a drink. Jesus has broken two taboos here. A Jew talking to a Samaritan, and a man alone talking to a woman. These were not the kind of things expected of any self respecting Jew, let alone a religious teacher.

But he treated her as a fellow human being. As a person. As an individual. And he did more than just speak to her. He offered her untold riches. Living water. Life eternal.

He began though by asking her for a drink. Recognising that this woman, this Samaritan, this outsider had something to offer him. He needed her. She had something he didn't have.

He then talks to her about this living water. Water that doesn't simply make for life in the physical sense like the water that flowed from the rock in the Old Testament story, but water that leads to eternal life. Water that brings the life of God into the human world; water that brings the new life that Jesus is offering. And, unsurprisingly, the woman says that she wants this water.

And so Jesus challenges her. This living water, this life of the Spirit, living with God in your life will be life in its fullness, but also life which makes demands. They begin a conversation, and as she speaks and listens we can begin to see she is sensing something important is happening here. This Jesus who asked her for a drink is now offering her something much bigger and better – something life changing and life enhancing.

She goes back to her village. And its interesting to note here that we read that she left her water jar behind. She had come to collect water – but she had found something more precious. So she tells the people of the village and they come out to meet Jesus. Many believed because of her testimony; Jesus stayed with them and taught them and encouraged them. They too developed their own faith. They received the living water. Their lives were transformed to be lives with God and they enjoyed all the benefits that came with it.

As we read the gospel stories we get the impression that Jesus' primary focus in his mission is the Jewish people, but that he knows too that God's plan is to include all people in his love and grace. And every now and again Jesus embraces non Jews, outsiders – as he does here. He shares the Jewish inheritance with them too. God's love cannot be limited – it is boundless. Its as if the living water Jesus talks about cannot be contained by the limits of one race or nation, but gushes out to include all.

The woman too shared the message with all those around her. The living water that she received from Jesus flowed through her and out to others. Bringing them the life it had brought her.

Once we receive this living water – and it is something that is offered to us too – our natural instinct is to share it. Its like if you were in a dry and dusty desert you would share the water you had with others who were as thirsty.

And I think this sums up a lot of what Jesus says – God's blessings – be they the living water offered by Jesus or the practical, physical things of life are to be shared.

In her words about refugees on Tuesday the Home Secretary referred a number of times to "the problem". I think we have to be wary of using such language which in effect dehumanises people. History teaches us that it can easily lead on to all kinds of horrors.

Here Jesus speaks to an outsider as an equal. Asking for water; sharing his riches. He treated the woman as a person known and loved by God. If nothing else, perhaps we could look on those refugees not as a problem nor an invasion but as individual people known and loved by God. Then we might see things somewhat differently.

Finish with the prayer

In the dry wildernesses of our lives,  
in the days of heat and thirst,  
you offer us living water,  
**Thank you, gracious and generous God.**

When we begin to doubt your presence,  
and grumble that your love is unreliable,  
you offer us living water,  
**Thank you, gracious and generous God.**

When life's regrets and the bad choices we have made  
leave us feeling excluded and unworthy,  
you offer us living water,  
**Thank you, gracious and generous God.**

When circumstances, or the inhumanity of others,  
have left us alone and wounded,  
you offer us living water,  
**Thank you, gracious and generous God.**

We thank you and praise you, O God,  
that how ever we may thirst,  
what ever we may need to satisfy our souls,  
you offer it freely and abundantly in Christ;  
**So we drink deep of the living water  
and, as we draw from your wells,  
we seek to pass the cup to others  
who, like us, are thirsty for your grace. Amen**