

## Living Water — Exodus 17:1-7; Romans 5:1-11; John 4:5-42

I wonder if you can remember the last time you were really thirsty? Not just a bit thirsty, but genuinely parched? Can you remember the last time it was a really hot day, and you were out walking, and you didn't have water with you, and you weren't sure where water would come from? Perhaps you've never been that desperate? But it is worth imagining... Because this is the feeling endured by the Israelites in the desert in Exodus 17; this is Jesus's level of thirst in John 4; and this is how the Bible talks of thirsting for the living Lord.

Another thing to bear in mind when we come to John's gospel. John *loves* double meanings. He employs them all the time. 'Living water', as we read it in the Bible, also simply meant running water, so what Jesus says to the woman by the well is genuinely confusing. Well water is great, running water is better. He asks for a drink from the well, and then announces, in effect, that he has some running water...

Let's return to the Israelites in the desert in Exodus 17. They have escaped Egypt after a series of ten plagues, all of which were summoned and then dispelled miraculously, and which affected only the Egyptians, never themselves. Finally, they have escaped the Egyptian army by crossing the red sea by foot, while the Egyptians, following, have been swept away when the waters flowed back again. They have seen every possible proof that God was for them — that they were his people.

But a nation of slaves is necessarily low on self esteem. People who have been treated as dirt won't suddenly snap out of thinking they're dirt — it takes time. They moan and complain for water because they don't believe that God could really want them — as much as their ongoing doubt that all this could really be happening through the power of a living, loving God.

God's assurance is simple: 'this is how you know you are mine,' the Lord seems to say — 'I give you living water!'

In the gospel Jesus is thirsty, and shocks a Samaritan woman by asking for water. In her day Jews didn't talk to Samaritans, much less to Samaritan women, much less to Samaritan women who have had five husbands. She could hardly be more of a pariah.

His is a genuine request, but also an excuse to offer her something that no one thought he could give — 'living water.'

She too can be saved — Jesus says so. She can have a spring of life inside her.

Now let's look at Paul's letter to the Romans.

The big argument in this letter is that the Gentiles are as completely welcome to salvation as the Jews — all are welcome in God's kingdom. This is the drive of much of Paul's writing. It is a big issue for him, but a non-issue for us — that debate was solved in his time, and we aren't still wrestling with it. But we are still, in a broader way, struggling with the assurance of salvation that the gentiles struggled with then.

By contrast the Jews of his day were very confident for themselves — they had their ancestry, they had their sacrificial system, they had kosher and circumcision as a physical marker for each man. They could say: 'I do these things, therefore I am in God's elect'.

Paul was now preaching that you *didn't* need to be a Jew, you *didn't* need to be circumcised and you *didn't* need to avoid bacon in order to belong to God's kingdom. But, just like Israelites in the Sinai — doubting that God could really choose *them* — so it was easy for new

gentile Christians to doubt that they could be saved — not doubting Jesus so much as doubting their own worthiness.

This is therefore the thrust of much of Paul's argument regarding justification in these early chapters of Romans. Heavy theology serves the purpose of unity and reassurance — Jews can be saved in Christ; Gentiles can be saved in Christ. There is no distinction.

The word 'justification' has been wrestled with a lot since Martin Luther, but the new perspective which has grown through the last forty years, is that Paul is using this word simply to denote the 'boundary marker' of those who had been saved. He talks of justification in terms of God treating people as saved — prior to Judgement Day — simply because of their faith in Jesus. Justification is just God's assurance that you won't reach the pearly gates and be turned away.

There is a Jewish tradition that if the Israelites wandered in the desert for forty years they must have had a constant water source, just like the manna which fell daily. The tradition is that the rock which Moses struck could be picked up, and carried with them in their wanderings. From the rock they had a constant source of living water... And God was their rock. You may doubt the fact of this, but you understand the significance.

Jesus met a woman at the well, and told her that despite every *exclusion* in her life, she could be *included* in God's sheepfold: she too could have the living water within her.

Paul assures us that despite our self doubt and struggles in faith and moral lapses, we need only ask and we too can have the living water of justification.

This loving inclusion is the beating heart of the gospel. This is what makes our faith different. And it makes us different, too. We need only think about the way God cared for slaves that he freed from Egypt; the way that Jesus cared for the woman at the well. Let this reassure us that our salvation is founded on his love, and not our acceptability — and then respond to that love with love and joy.

**Amen.**