

Third Sunday in Lent
Year A - 19/3/2017

Exodus 17:1-7
Psalm 95
Romans 5:1-11
John 4:5-42

In the name of the Trinity; Creator, Redeemer, and Life-Giver...

It is a hot day. The sun has been beating down since almost first light, and now the noonday sun is almost unbearable. The woman makes her way slowly from the city, towards the well that is a little way away. She is alone. The rest of the women from the city came to draw their water earlier, in the cool of the dawn, and they will return again at dusk, exchanging gossip and their tales of the day.

But this woman is not welcome to draw water with the rest of the town. She has grown tired of the hurtful words directed at her, she has had enough of the sideways glances and scornful looks of the other women. So she comes alone, in the heat of the day, to do her duty.

As she approaches the well she notices a man sitting down, in the sparse shade that the surrounding trees gave. She is unsure what to do. She doesn't expect a stranger to be there, and is not sure whether to approach. But then the man takes the initiative, and the woman reluctantly engages in conversation, unaware that her life will never to be the same again.

The man is obviously a Jew. His race and hers have never got along. The Jews regarded her entire race as unclean, and considered their religious practices to be questionable. For this man to even speak to a Samaritan is unusual, to say the least. But for him to speak to her, a Samaritan woman is scandalous. She is unsure how to respond, so she answers with a guarded, even hostile response. She is suspicious of his motives. She is glad that no-one else is around to witness this strange interaction.

He makes some reference to living water. Despite her best intentions, her suspicions have turned to curiosity, her guarded nature is melting away. You can almost see the excitement rising up inside her. Who is this man? What is this living water he talks about?

But then, the man asks about her husband. Shock and embarrassment rise up again; maybe he's just the same as the rest of them, making fun of her and her situation, casting judgment on her apparently questionable morals. Yet, there is something different about the way he is asking the question. There is no judgment or condemnation in his voice; there is a quiet and gentle tone, almost respect, a tone of voice she is not used to hearing.

But then he speaks again and his words hit her right between the eyes. With just a few words he holds up a mirror and shows her herself as she truly is. He knows her; he knows not only her labels and her boxes but he knows from where they came; he knows the truth behind them; he knows the secrets she has almost forgotten. The dark shameful things hidden deep inside her.

With just a few words he peels back the covers, the defences, the layers of self-protection, and exposes her to the light naked before his gaze. And yet he doesn't attack her; he doesn't expose her vulnerable points and then go for them. Rather, he names the labels only to peel them away as though they don't matter to him. He sees through them; beneath them and calls her by a name she's never heard, but a name somehow familiar.

It is a name that seems to belong to someone she might once have aspired to become; someone who was lost, seemingly dead, a long time ago. And as he speaks that name something stirs within her; something awakening as though living water has been poured on a dry seed and it has bedded and sprouted in an instant, reaching straight up towards the light.

Labels, scars, defences, and fears all fall away and with a sudden rush of blood she is engaging the stranger in an animated conversation. Someone she barely recognises as herself has begun pouring forth in words long dammed up about her hopes and aspirations; about the hopes and aspirations of her people; about her fears and insecurities and the fears and insecurities of her people.

She is talking about her yearning for the truth and for the one who will reveal the truth and put things right; the one who will peel back the layers of hostility and hurt and reveal the truth of all things to all people.

And suddenly there is an awkward moment where she realises that the hope she has just described is what this man has just done for her and she knows who this man is without realising it. This is surely the anointed one, the gifted one, the chosen one, the one who comes to save her. For hasn't what was long dead within her, entombed forever in labelled boxes just been raised to new life? And isn't she just bursting to tell someone; to let others see for themselves.

And so she finds herself going to even those she wouldn't have dared talk to but to whom she now pours forth her story: "Come and see for yourselves a man who knew me from the inside out", she says; "a man who showed me who I am; who showed me who I was created to be."

"This is a man who opened my grave and lifted me from the box in which I lay and unbound me from layer after layer of grave clothes each bearing the labels that cut and killed. This is a man who saw me for what I had never yet been and never dared to hope I could be and invited this unknown real me to come forth and live".

And so, like the woman proclaimed to her villagers, let me invite you also: "Come and see for yourselves. Come and be named for who you are, for who you have been, for who you are yet to become.

Come and see what he will find in you; what labels and scars he will peel back and call you to leave behind and to live free from; a call both exhilarating and terrifying. Come and see. Come and confess that this one is truly the saviour of the world. Come and see, that he might pour into your hearts the living water of being truly and deeply known forgiven and accepted. So that he might feed you with the mysterious food of doing God's will and the wine of your destiny embraced, for this is the One who will raise the world to life and lead us dancing into the banqueting room of heaven.

In the name of God. Amen.