

<playing in street gutters as a child, racing “boats” down them in the spring meltwater>

Today's readings are about faith, and water, and discipleship, and living the Kingdom, and love, and sacrifice – there is so, so much that is shared with us. God's grace and love, His insistence on saving us, our salvation in Him despite our blindness, His sacrificing Himself for us, again and again – all of this are contained in these readings. Most of all, the pure, overwhelming, fantastic, LOVE – the love of God that breaks all bounds – that envelopes us, saves us, and pulls us along

In our reading from Exodus, the Israelites are thirsty – very, very thirsty. They have been wandering around in the desert for a while, though in fact they are still early in their eventual journey. They have run out of water, and are afraid for their lives. In their fear, they get angry – sounds quite reasonable, to human understanding. From God's perspective though, they were being extremely UNreasonable – for they had forgotten God and rejected the belief that God provided for them, even though every day they went out and gathered up manna to eat. The name Massah means “proving”, and the name Meribah means “strife” -- at Massah and Meribah, the Israelites contended with God and demanded that God prove His capability.

... People to Moses: “Give us water!” (as if Moses had some)

... People assert that MOSES (not God) brought them out of Egypt, and only to have them die in the desert – as if that was the intention all along. Their words deny God the credit for bringing them out of Egypt, impugn the integrity of Moses and God by accusing them of bringing the people out here to die, and show a lack of faith in God's ability to provide for them.

... Moses lost faith that He could lead the people according to God's direction (“What will I do with this people? – a little more and they will stone me!”)

... God responds to their panicked cries, DESPITE their combined lack of faith – and rescues them.

Psalm 95

God asserts that Moses and the Israelites were really accusingly asking: “Is God real? Does God exist? Did God really bring us out and does God have the power to save us? Should we rather seek our own way, because God is impotent?” -- they tested Him, and put Him to the proof.

Then we come to Jesus Christ, and the episode recounted in our Gospel reading from John 4. This is, in effect, a lived-out parable.

A lone Samaritan woman comes out to get water. For a good upstanding Jew, this has alarm bells ringing all over it. First of all, she was Samaritan. You could call the Samaritans and the Jews close cousins. The Samaritans were an amalgamation of Israelites and foreigners brought in by the Assyrian conquerors after 722 bc, to settle the land with inhabitants who would be loyal to Assyria. There was opposition between the Samaritans and the Jews because the Samaritans refused to worship in Jerusalem, and because the Jews regarded the Samaritans as a polluted people, a defiled people because of their mixing with foreigners. In the 2nd century b.c. the Samaritans helped the Syrians in their wars against the Jews. In 128 b.c. the Jewish high priest retaliated and burned the Samaritan temple on Mount Gerizim. Samaritans and Jews did NOT like each other. Because the Jews regarded the Samaritans as a polluted people, to associate with them or use any of their objects would make one unclean – not fit to associate with other Jews, and definitely not fit to enter the temple: not fit to worship God.

Second of all, she was alone. In that culture, there was very few isolated cases of “individual”. Almost everything was “community” – the concept of you yourself acting independently of them just didn't make sense – wouldn't occur to you, *unless you were forced to it*.

The fact that she came alone probably meant she was outcast from coming when the rest of the women in the town came – in fact, a woman out on her own was automatically assumed to be a prostitute, someone forced to get by on their own because of the rejection of their community. Part of this is confirmed by Jesus' announcement to her that though she has had five husbands, the person she is living with is not her husband – she was a scandal, and to be avoided.

Any Jew who associated with this person, not only a Samaritan but a scandal, was asking to be outcast and rejected from their own community. Jesus faced extreme humiliation if people knew what He was about to do.

And Jesus, the Good Shepherd, not only associates with her, but reaches out to her – reaches out to one who is despised, rejected, looked-down upon by His people. He sacrifices His own reputation and social standing to reach out in love.

He enters the territory of the despised people – and sits down where, sooner or later, someone is bound to come by. He asks for their help: “Give me some water.” He is not exactly welcomed! “Who are you to ask me for water?” Jesus reply: “Ah! If you knew who I am, you would ask ME for water – living water!” The woman's reply (extensively edited by me): “Sir, you are crazy.”

Jesus pursues His point: “the water I give will become in those who drink a well of water springing up to eternal life.” The woman misunderstands, thinking Jesus means physical water: “Give me some, that I need never come back to this well again!”

Jesus switches tacks: “Go, get your husband.” Woman: “I have none.” Jesus: “I know!” The woman switches tacks: “We understand God differently.” Jesus: “The time is here: true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such people to be his worshipers. God is spirit, and the people who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth.”

Woman: “That will happen when the Messiah comes.” Jesus: “I am the Messiah.”

They must have had more conversation not recorded, for as the woman told her villagers: “He told me everything I ever did.” And because of His words many more believed. As the villagers said to the woman, “... we know that this one really is the Savior of the world.”

I say this is a lived-out-parable because it is essentially a story. The story is that the Good Shepherd came to some lost sheep, and brought them into the sheepfold. They were brought into the sheepfold by their acceptance of the Good Shepherd, and their faith in Him. They were brought in, to worship the Father in spirit and in truth. They were brought in through their drinking of living water, the water of Christ.

At Meribah, the rock was struck and water came out of it so the people could drink.

On Good Friday, in the same way, we know that Christ was struck on the cross and living water comes out of Him, so people can drink in faith – and attain eternal life. He is the rock that was struck, and He is the living water for eternal life.

At Meribah, the Israelites lost faith and demanded that God prove Himself to them. As Paul writes, through Christ God has already proven Himself to us, by rescuing us from ourselves, and restoring us

to be His Images. Through this faith, God declares us worthy of Him, and we have peace with the Father through the Messiah, Jesus.

Paul is speaking to the church, to all those who have been brought into the sheep-fold of Christ, to you and me, and reminding us of our rescue by the Good Shepherd, a rescue given through faith. As Paul wrote:

... We are justified (ie: declared worthy of God) by faith.

... We have peace with God (Father) through Jesus Christ (not through our own works or abilities, but because Christ came to us as the Good Shepherd, and gave His life for us). So,

... We boast (of Christ and our life in Him) when we suffer and things go wrong for us – because

... God proved his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us. While we were still acting against God, in enemy to God, God brought us into His bosom, into His heart, through the death of His Son – Jesus the Christ.

... we therefore boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation. We are saved.

And God doesn't want to just stop with us. As Jesus said, “the Father seeks people to be His worshipers.” We each are asked to come with Jesus. We are asked to join Him in gathering fruit for eternal life. We are to walk with the Good Shepherd – we are to BE Good Shepherds. We are not burdened, because nothing depends on us – we merely tell others what we see and know: we testify to the light. We don't need to worry about “success” -- for all believe through Him, not through us.

We are asked to get outside of ourselves: don't worry about our reputation, what others think of us, even of what we fear – we are asked to look where there are people in need, people hurting, people questioning – and be Good Shepherds for them. As Paul wrote: “The love that comes from God and that produces our love for God has been poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us.” Let us rejoice in that love, live in that love, share in that love. Let us play in the Living Water, the water of Christ – and let us share that water with all who are thirsty.

To God's glory, and to our joy.

Amen.