

HOMILY PREACHED AT SJH LENT 3 YEAR A 19 MARCH 2017

Water is the natural link between today's readings. Moses strikes a rock in the wilderness and water comes out to quench the thirsty, grumbling Israelites. Jesus is thirsty and asks a Samaritan woman to give him a drink of water she has drawn from a well. There follows a lengthy dialogue in which the woman moves from everyday matters to a recognition, at least in part, of who Jesus is. She perceives that he is a prophet, and then talks of the Messiah. We learn much more about her growing awareness than we did about Nicodemus's, whose meeting with Jesus was last week's gospel.

Water is basic to existence and is often used as a symbol. What are we to understand by 'living water'? There are two main meanings, and quite probably Jesus has both in mind: it's not an 'either or'. The first is that living water stands for the teaching that Jesus gives. This is a symbolism that has support in the Old Testament. There are two examples in the book of Proverbs:

The teaching of the wise is a fountain of life,... . (13.14) and

The words of a man's mouth are deep waters; the fountain of wisdom is a gushing stream.
(18.4)

Wise teaching is desired as eagerly as flowing water in a hot climate.

The second meaning is that living water stands for the Holy Spirit. Again this has an Old Testament background. The prophet Ezekiel reports God's words to his people in exile:

I will sprinkle clean water upon you,... . A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you;... . (36.25,26)

And this understanding of living water as the Holy Spirit is made explicit later in John's gospel. At an annual feast in Jerusalem Jesus proclaims,

"Out of the believer's heart shall flow rivers of living water."

The gospel writer comments

...he said this about the Spirit, which believers in him were to receive.

Where do we see ourselves in all this? Going back to the thirsty Israelites, our natural reaction is to think what an ungrateful bunch they are. After what God has done for them, delivering them from slavery in Egypt, is he going to abandon them? The point of the narrative is that God provides even when his people are rebellious. It should make us think what we do with our dissatisfactions. Do we blame God, or his representatives, or do we reflect on how we have known his goodness in the past and have faith that he will deliver us in the present? Turning to Jesus' encounter at the well,

how thirsty are we? Are we seeking to worship God in spirit and in truth? Spirit and truth: these correspond to the two symbolic meanings of living water. The Spirit flows into us and out of us to others. The truth is the teaching of Jesus, and in S. John's gospel most of Jesus' teaching is about who he is: the Son who is one with the Father, the bread of life, the light of the world, the good shepherd and so on. The more we grow in our knowledge of him, the more we will see what really matters in life. Our thirst will be satisfied.