

## **8.00am, Sunday 19<sup>th</sup> March (Lent III) – Jn.4:15-42**

I was seriously tempted this week to find a new Lenten resolution. Give up preaching for Lent. The thought became steadier and stronger the more the week went on, and this sermon remained stubbornly unwritten. They're normally all written by Thursday evening, so what went wrong this week? Partly it was me: preachers hit dry patches like anyone else and at the moment I'm in a preaching dry patch. Partly it was the fact that every time I nearly wrote something else more urgent, attractive or entertaining beckoned. And partly it was this Gospel reading itself, which I found it very difficult to make sense of.

So why was that? Two things, really, both related to what might you call the obvious preaching point in it – where Jesus says to the woman, '... those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.' What's wrong with that? The first thing is that I am not really a gushy kind of person. My experience of God is not, by and large, of a constant bubbling of love, joy, and peace. There's a certain kind of Christianity which lays all the emphasis on how you feel the warmth and closeness of Jesus your best friend, which is full of enthusiasm and exclamation marks. This reading is the kind of reading it loves, and unfortunately it just isn't me. My experience of God is a bit more like that of the poet who compares prayer to calling up to a window in the hope of response, who waits and waits and waits without much to show for it. 'I would have refrained long since / but that peering once through my locked fingers/ I thought that I detected the movement of a curtain.' This reading doesn't seem to know much of the sheer hiddenness of God, and when a reading fails to chime it is difficult to preach it.

And perhaps my second problem isn't that different. St Lawrence's, as you know, takes the idea of the liturgical year quite seriously. The year has its movements and rhythms, just like the spiritual life. There's a time for dancing – Pentecost, Easter, - and a time for austerity – the season of Lent. This seems to be a dancing Gospel, for Pentecost, not for Lent. What's it doing here, now? How to preach a Lenten sermon about living water?

Well, perhaps the first way to answer that question is obvious. It's partly right to preach this one in Lent to make the point, to those who might forget, that there is a perfectly proper place for gushiness. That actually Jesus Christ is love, joy, and peace, that he is living water which can well up within you and change sorrow into dancing. That Lent and Easter aren't equal things in Christian life: Easter sets the tone for the whole. Even our fasting has to happen in a universe which is, because of Easter, fundamentally and forever defined by feasting.

Well, that would be one sermon but there is another: a deeper reason as to why this is a Lenten Gospel, and not just a corrective from outside the season. When you first read those words 'the water that I will give', I suppose most of us – if we pause to think at all – probably think in terms of the water meaning something like spiritual refreshment or energy or joy. And all of these things come into it, I am sure, but perhaps John's primary meaning was more concrete. Set this reading, say, alongside John's telling of the crucifixion story and you get a new light on it. At the end, John says, 'the soldiers came and broke the legs of the men who had been crucified with him. But when they came to Jesus and saw that he was already dead, they did not break his legs. Instead, one of the soldiers pierced his side with his spear, and blood and water flowed out.' Blood and water flowed; the water I will give them will become a spring inside them: might it be that we are to understand Jesus' words this morning at least partly about his death? That the spring within is not primarily a matter of our feelings or experiences, but of his death planted within us, and

somehow mysteriously pouring out life?

Death planted within us, and somehow mysteriously pouring out life. That is a strange thought, but one that seems close to the heart of the New Testament. Take St. Paul. He writes that when we are baptised we are buried with Christ, and share in his death. He says that he has been crucified to the world with Christ, and that is 'no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me.' The old man of violence, Saul of Tarsus, is dead; and a new man, Paul the Apostle, lives – and this new man's life is at some deep level not merely his own, but the way Christ lives in the world now: part of the Body of Christ. Paul writes that he is always carrying around within him the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may be made visible in him.

And that means, I think, carrying much more than the mere memory of Christ's death as something outside him, as a good example. Christ's death is not the kind of event which remains outside us. Like a star, it has a gravitational pull which calls to us, and draws us in. And as we merge with it, we are in some ways destroyed and in some ways re-formed, and at the end of the burning, our whole being is on fire with its brilliance – and yet, like Moses' burning bush, not consumed. We are still ourselves, and yet the glory of God pulses within. That is the Christian hope. The great act of love on the Cross – the sheer generosity at the heart of everything - comes to be in me, and makes my life flow with it, giving life to all around. A spring of water, welling up within to eternal life.

I'm conscious that all this might sound a little vague and mystical, and you might be thinking that that Lenten resolution about not preaching sounds increasingly advisable. So enough words for the moment. Except to say just one more thing. All these words are just pointers to the reality of what we will do in a few moments. I've spoken of how the death of Christ draws us in, of how love absorbs us and plays through us. I have spoken, and in a few moments God will do. Because that is what the Eucharist means: that is what it means to receive Jesus' body and blood and for these things to be in your bodies, in your stomachs, in your hearts. You will consume the bread and the wine, and digest it, make it part of yourself. But that is not the only action going on. God in Christ will also be consuming you, digesting you, making you part of himself. And in all that, you will not be destroyed, but remade, changed forever through the one great spring of love. As Gerard Manley Hopkins says, you will be Christ:

'...for Christ plays in ten thousand places,  
lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his,  
to the Father, through the features of men's faces.'