

This encounter at Jacob's well is not as spectacular as Moses demonstration of faith. Water from a rock – water in the face of (something deeper than doubt...) – miracle of miracles (Fiddler on the Roof)...and they called that place Massah & Meribah (Test & Quarrel – quite a name for a holy site). But here, at the ancestral well of Jacob's family – JACOB, no less! – a discussion flows from a question that has nothing to do with water, and everything to do with God; a miracle of a very different kind.

Jesus and his crew are not exactly in the Promised Land – they are as good as on foreign soil. And at the well Jesus meets a woman who may well be something of an outcast. (Having had 4 husbands and living with one who was not her husband may or may not contribute to this) The conversation soon includes, not just her husband, but also the disciples and all the rest of the townsfolk, and the miracle is belief. A Samaritan community hears Jesus and accepts that he really is the "Saviour of the world..." For the record, no one gets any water.

This is a real 'gospel' story in the best sense of the word though...good news is conveyed – hope is extended – minds are changed (amongst the townsfolk, at least; the disciples are left looking confused and aggrieved by the whole thing) The message for the disciples is (essentially) open your eyes and expand your minds; there are no clear boundaries in this new order – (look around; can you not see the fruit of God's labour waiting to be harvested...?) Hopeful and open to possibilities - that is where the gospel lesson leaves me...even this week.

How often have we begged for a sign - like the one the Israelites experienced in the desert? How often have we longed for a demonstration of power, or some visible, tangible record of the power and presence of God? How often have we been disappointed?

Do I think that the recent pandemic is a sign from God? NO - emphatically and unequivocally, NO. But what I have noticed is a sudden urgent and genuine outbreak of curiosity and compassion; people are being compelled to pay attention to one another - to listen differently and to act according to a different, corporate understanding of what it means to be human together. We social animals, too often and too willing to delegate our interactions to social media, are now discovering what it really means to depend on one another. sure, it's a horrible way to discover this elegant truth, and there have been plenty of examples of continued selfish foolishness, but more and more often as the news developed, I am seeing signs of grace - real humanity - real compassion.

One of the things I want you to notice about Jesus encounter with the woman at the well is her isolation. She comes alone, in the heat of the day, and is at first unsettled by the idea that Jesus would ask anything of her. This isn't social distancing, these are signs of isolation. She is cut off, as a Samaritan, from interaction with her Jewish kindred; as a woman from the social company of men; as someone in a different kind of romantic relationship from those who are bound by different understandings of family dynamics. And Jesus speaks peace and order into her isolation. He acknowledges the difficulties, and dares to suggest that God - being God - might have a plan for circumventing those difficulties.

Messiah means 'anointed one' - and anointing was a symbol of the presence and favour of God in an enterprise (usually reserved for kings/heads of state or religious ritual) To recognize that "The anointed" was coming is to say 'we know that God will give us a sign - and that sign will be flesh and blood.' She is isolated but hopeful, and Jesus assures her (and us) that her hope (and ours) is not unfounded. God has indeed chosen to act - God still chooses to be present.

That is the truth I cling to as the news breaks around me in waves. The reality of the gospel is that even in the panic of isolation, there is hope; even in the anxiety of the unknown, there is the promise of peace; even in the arid environment of fear, there is living water for all.

Don't misunderstand me - we are living in a global health crisis, that is far from being over, never mind fully understood. New information comes to light every day, and good information can be difficult to find. But the God we proclaim and the faith we profess assures us of peace in the midst of the storm and light in the darkest of times. Live THAT out as children of a loving God and followers of a risen and present Christ and all will be well.