Lent Three: An Oasis of Grace

Here we are – the third Sunday in Lent, half way through our journey to Holy Week. And after time in the wilderness struggling with our demons, being told that we must be born again from narrow religious certainty into cosmic eternal mystery, we are now led to an oasis of grace. A place of rest and restoration, a holy place in which we might drink in the grace of God to strengthen us for what lies ahead.

The surprise of Lent is that it is not all struggle, not all hard slog and not all going without. Lent is also about being receptive to the generous love of God – surprisingly given to us in the wilderness and shockingly announced to us who, like the Samaritan woman at the well, are of the wrong category of person. Grace comes to where it is most needed.

To the chosen, but not very faithful, people lost in the wilderness water is given because it is needed not because they deserve it. And to the woman of Samaria at the well comes the love of God in the form of the divine made flesh, Jesus the Christ, in a way and at a time of life when she might least expect hope or grace. She would have been regarded as dubious, as damaged goods, by any righteous assessment – wrong ethnicity, wrong religious group, wrong gender, and wrong morality – and yet it is to her in the midst of her daily life that Jesus comes.

As a story it is beautiful rich piece of theatre which the audience of the gospel of John would have appreciated even more than we can easily. The setting by the well of Jacob brings with it hints of the great courtship meetings of the patriarchs at desert wells (such as Isaac and Rebekah). And the first century audience would have been very familiar with the prejudice against Samaritans and the differences regarding the location of the temple. There would also have been a deep appreciation of the disciples concerns that Jesus shouldn't be seen talking with a woman in a public place.

So against this backdrop we see and hear this exciting encounter which begins as fairly flirtatious repartee about who is speaking to whom and how many husbands there have been but at some point plunges from the surface level into the depths of what we most need in life.

Have you ever been in one of those conversations or relationships where you are sailing along at a certain level, maybe having fun, maybe finding it all a bit hard work, and all of a sudden it is as though you sailed over the continental shelf and you are now in very deep water? The conversation is no longer just interesting or entertaining or even informative. The conversation is now about the very stuff of life – it could not be of more importance.

The point of such a transition in this story is about living water. Initially the woman thinks of literal living water (or fresh, sweet, flowing water which in ancient times was safe water) and wants to know how to access it so that she might be relieved of one of her chores. But she is

further into the conversation that will change her life than she knows and moment by moment she begins to realise who is she speaking with and what she is hearing. And her real want rises to the surface and claims the promise of life given her. She still does not grasp fully all that she has stumbled into but she has consented to life, to taking of the living water.

Sometimes grace comes to us, as it did the woman of Samaria, whilst we go about daily life. And sometimes, as in the reading from Paul's letter to the Romans it comes from the heart of the struggle. It is no less surprising or sweet.

I want to read you again the first few verses of chapter five. Just imagine them as a mission statement on the wall of a gymnasium and on the wall of a bedroom in a hospice, and hear how different – and maybe the same – they are. "... we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us."

If we see that as a mission statement at the gym then we might hear that by our sweat and perseverance alone we are saved – we conquer and are rewarded. But if we imagine those words over the beds of the dying who have struggled and apparently failed, how might we hear and see grace at work?

I have the deepest sense that it is at those points in our lives, in our community, on our planet, where there is suffering and brokenness that grace, God's love, can most intimately enter in. That it is where we apparently fail that love grows most surprisingly and that the character that struggles to emerge in such harsh conditions is hopeful and receptive to grace. Or another way of saying that is that hearts and minds that have been broken open by failure are the more open to the in pouring of the Holy Spirit.

The promise of this morning's Scripture and the promise of Lent is that where ever we are in life's journey God desires for us new life – living water that will quench our deepest thirst - and God will seek to give that to us where ever we allow even a chink for the spirit to move in.

So this Lent let us acknowledge our thirst and allow our brokenness to be what it is – our very selves broken open – so that love might find us and fill us with the hope that does not disapoint.

Even so, come Lord Jesus Christ.