

A spring of water gushing up to eternal life (John chapter 4, All Saints Maldon 14th March 2014)

A long time ago, I went to hear a man with the extraordinary name of Gonville French-Beytagh preach a sermon. He was the Dean of Johannesburg in the apartheid years, who was sent to prison for opposing apartheid and was put in solitary confinement. And this is what he told us. He said, 'You know that it says in the Creed that "The Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son."' Then he paused. 'When I was in solitary confinement, I discovered that the Holy Spirit does not "proceed from the Father and the Son."' And he paused again, enjoying our shock of a dean not believing in the Creed. He started again: 'When I was in prison, I discovered that the Holy Spirit does not proceed from the Father and the Son. I discovered that the Holy Spirit **gushes** from the Father and the Son.'

Terrible circumstances and a man of faith discovering the living presence of God. May we, during coronavirus, especially the isolated and the ill, discover the God whose Spirit gushes down upon us just and most precisely when we need him.

Back to the woman at the well. She is offered living water in a life of terrible drudgery. Literally, the routine of trudging to collect still water from the well every day, perhaps more than once. And the contrast of the living water that Jesus promises to her, Paul describes as the Spirit. 'God has poured his love into our hearts through the Holy Spirit whom he has given to us.' A prayer of gratitude that we can say daily.

But, when the woman says, yes, she wants the living water, Jesus doesn't give it to her. There is a condition. 'Go and call your husband and come back.' And it turns out that what she must bring back to Jesus is not a husband but her whole life's history. 'I haven't got a husband.' 'You are right in saying that you haven't got a husband. You have had five husbands. And the one you have now, is not your husband.'

Why has she had 6 husbands? It doesn't matter. It may be a pattern of mistreatment and abuse. It may be a pattern of compulsive behaviour. It may be both. Which ever it is, Jesus has put his finger on where she is trapped.

And we, too, also have our patterns of negativity in which we are trapped. Can I give you a simple example of this, and with apologies to smokers, but it could be any of our habits. Why did you have your last cigarette? Quite simply, because you had the one before. And the one before that. Why did I gossip this week? Because I gossiped last week. Why did I lose my temper? Because I have done it before. Now, it is probably the case, that the things you are trapped in, perhaps fear, or low self-esteem, for example, go right back to how you were treated as a child, or to poverty, or to parental absence or excessive parental sternness, or maybe even genetic things that nobody has power over. Whatever it was, there just aren't enough people in the world who display amazing freedom; freedom to enjoy the present moment all the time, without being held down by negative patterns.

But Jesus tells the woman she can be set free, but only if she brings to him her whole life's history. You will notice that she begins by beginning to think, 'I've got to conceal from him who I really am.' 'I don't have a husband.' But she ends up being told by him who she is. She

makes this extraordinary confession to her fellow villagers. 'Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done.'

Now, it is my assumption that this woman didn't herself know everything she had ever done. And it's my assumption that we don't know everything we have ever done. Apart from anything else, we have all done things that are so upsetting to us that we have forgotten them. The poet TS Eliot said in two different places, 'Humankind cannot bear too much reality.'

Jesus loved this woman as much as anyone can love someone. That is who he is and what he does. It is only absolute love and absolute respect that can help us to be able to face ourselves, and then to discover that we are not ashamed. Few of us are possessed of such love, and therefore few of us make an absolute difference in the lives of others. But we still could be like that. We still could be the people who receive the spirit of freedom in a profound way, and we could still pass it on to others. St Seraphim of Sarov, a Russian saint who lived at the beginning of the 19th century, said:

'Find peace for yourselves and a thousand souls shall be saved.'

What a thrilling search we can all take part in, even as our churches lock down somewhat. Perhaps some of us are going to go on an enforced retreat now, in which we are going to search out the Spirit of the living God.

'Find peace for yourselves, and a thousand souls will be saved.' Amen.