

Knox Uniting Church Cluster

Sunday March 8th 2026 – (Year A. Third Sunday of Lent)

Sermon (reflection) by Russell Croxford at Rowville Uniting Church

Bible passages: Exodus 17:1-7; John 4:4-18, 27-30, 39-42 (NRSVUE)

“Water is Life”

PREAMBLE (introduction to theme)

Today's gospel story tells of the time Jesus met the Samaritan woman by the well. This story says so much about Jesus. There are so many themes in this one passage: Crossing cultures. Overcoming taboos. Loving instead of hating enemies. True worship – which is not really about the temple or other places but is worship in spirit and in truth. And, Jesus' mission and doing the will of the father. But a big theme (perhaps the *key* theme in this story), is that of *Living water* – true life from Jesus which satisfies the spiritual thirst that all people have - whether they realise it or not. Just as physical water is absolutely essential to all life on our planet, this living water is essential for life from above – life that flows from God. And in this story we see two aspects of this theme of living water – firstly, the *receiving* of it, as the woman did, evidenced by the transformation within her, and secondly, the *sharing* of that living water with others, as the woman did, resulting in 'many others becoming believers'. Our theme today, “*Water is Life*” reminds us to receive and pass on this water of life from our Lord.

MESSAGE

Water is Life! Without water we die. But do we take it for granted? I think we do sometimes. We turn on the tap and we instantly get fresh, clean water gushing out. It's always there when we need it. But do we really appreciate our beautiful water supply? It seems to me that we appreciate water much more when we don't have it, or very much of it! My two water tanks sat empty over January and February, so my garden suffered. It made me appreciate water that little bit more. Recently when I was on a summer hike in the high country, water was very scarce. I had to depend on whatever water I could carry. There were a couple of spots where a small amount of water trickled under rocks and grass, but even that water needed to be boiled or treated before drinking. That experience makes you appreciate every small drop!

But that was just a two-day hike. What if we *never* had clean, safe water on tap? That how it is for over a quarter of the world's population. That's about 2 billion people who don't have clean, safe water like we do. Now that really is a serious social justice issue in our world. Water is Life. Water is the most essential ingredient for life. Every living thing – human, animals, plants – must have it to survive.

For this reason, water becomes such a powerful metaphor for all aspects of life. Water, in all its forms – rain, rivers, lakes, oceans – is used to symbolise different dimensions of our life and well-being. This happens in our religious practice too, our baptism being one of the major symbolic uses of water. The refreshing, quenching, cleansing, healing properties of water are related metaphorically to our spiritual state in lots of ways.

It's no surprise that water is constantly referred to throughout the bible, reminding us of all the wonderful qualities of God and our relationship with him. And of course, water is one of the key symbols of the Holy Spirit.

So today, in both our bible passages from Exodus and John's gospel water is the theme and in each case it leads on to a lesson about faith in God.

In our gospel reading from John 4 we have the very well-known story of Jesus meeting the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well. He and his disciples had been traveling north and stopped in the

heat of the day to rest at the well. The disciples head off to buy things in the nearby town, leaving Jesus alone. Then along comes this local woman to draw water. It would be normal and expected for a man not to speak to a woman in that situation, let alone a Samaritan person, hated by the Jews. But that didn't stop Jesus.

Their interaction begins with a brief conversation about being physically thirsty and needing a drink from the well, but quickly leads into a lesson about 'life-giving water' with an invitation to the woman to partake of this *living* water by which she would 'never thirst again' and would experience 'eternal life' (v14). After quite some interrogating of Jesus (assuming out of curiosity), this woman appears to become very open to the possibility that this stranger might actually be the promised Messiah that her people longed for, who maybe really can give her this living water.

During the season of Lent, our gospel passages look at several personal encounters people had with Jesus. Last Sunday it was Jesus and Nicodemus. It's interesting that this gospel writer has placed the woman's story immediately after the Nicodemus story. It's like a deliberate comparison of the two. Let's consider the differences.

Nicodemus was male, educated, financially secure, influential and powerful. He is an 'insider'. He comes secretly to Jesus at night. He struggles to understand what Jesus is talking about. (although later appears as a Jesus supporter in chapters 7 & 19). The woman is a foreigner, female, probably poor, has faced a lot of hardship with the loss of five husbands (who may have died or divorced her), and in many ways is powerless. She is an 'outsider'. She meets Jesus in a public place in the middle of the day. She seems to go further than Nicodemus in her understanding of Jesus. Quite some differences.

Giving that this story says a lot about the socio-cultural plight of first century women, it's worth mentioning that today is 'International Women's Day'. The idea of this day is to recognise the social, economic, cultural and political achievements of women. But just as importantly, this day is a call to greater gender equality. Days like this do seem to have helped advance the cause of women – albeit very slowly – too slowly. At least we can see positive changes when we compare things now (in most places, not all) to what the woman at the well had to deal with in her time.

Jesus would have been acutely aware of the social norms with respect to woman. But of course he so often *ignored* social norms, showing how much he valued her as a person, as he valued all 'outsiders'. He valued 'insiders' like Nicodemus too, even though he generally gave Pharisees a hard time. His desire was for Nicodemus to be 'born from above' (Jn3:3), which is essentially the same thing as Jesus wanting to give 'living water' to the woman (v10). So, despite the differences between the two stories, there are similarities. Two people with an inner longing for more, and in both cases encountering the One who wants to give them that something more, as a free gift of life.

This free gift is the Living Water Jesus talks about. And it's not the only time he mentions Living Water. Later in John (Jn 7:37-38) it comes up again. On that occasion it was the final day of the significant Jewish festival, the 'Feast of Tabernacles', which included a 'water-pouring' ritual (by the priest) to give thanks for the harvest and pray for autumn rains. Jesus stands up before the crowd and takes that water symbolism to a new level, declaring, "If anyone is thirsty, let them come to me and drink" (7:37) then, "Streams of living water will flow from within them" (v38). Of course many didn't understand what he was on about, and his words just angered the religious leaders.

What we can learn from the woman in our story is that she *seeks* this living water. Apparently, she wasn't fully convinced about Jesus' identity, but she was impacted enough to rush off to tell others in the village about this guy she met at the well, inviting them to come and hear for themselves. So, here is a double challenge for us: To not only *receive* this living water, but to *share* it with others.

Receive and share. Those two challenges always go together in the gospel. Receive and share God's love, mercy, grace, and life.

So, let's now consider the other story about water, from our Exodus reading. The Israelites were given a gift of water – *several* times in fact. But did they receive it well? Actually...not so well, as it turns out.

This story takes place not that long into the Israelite's 40-year sojourn in the desert. God had just miraculously led them out of captivity in Egypt, crossing the Red Sea and into the desert and into freedom. But the euphoria didn't seem to last very long. By the time we get to this incident, the honeymoon was well and truly over, and the complaints were coming in thick and fast against their leader Moses, who only recently had been their hero, liberating them from slavery.

In our reading they have arrived at a dry place in the desert to camp, but there was no water there and they were thirsty. So, instead of trusting the God who could part the waters of the Red Sea, they start grumbling against Moses (v 3). This is already the third time they've grumbled. The first time was when the water was unfit to drink, so they grumbled (15:22-24). So God miraculously made that water pure to drink. Then they moved on to another camp, but they had no food, and again they grumbled (16:1-3). So God did another miracle of providing quail at night and manna (bread) in the morning. But there was no apparent display of praise and thanks for that. It was as if they felt they *deserved* these miracles, like it was their *right*. Finally, they come to this camp in today's story and again, there is no water. And again, they grumble (v1-4). And again, God performed a miracle, using Moses to make water gush out from a lifeless rock in the desert. And again, no sign of thanks. Just complaints. No wonder Moses was becoming exasperated!

Now I have a question here. Is it okay to come to God with our human needs and complain to him? When we read, in other scriptures, such as in the Psalms, the people do seem to complain a lot to God about their situation. There is a lot of lamenting and frustration that God has apparently let them down and abandoned them. This kind of open expression to God of our frustration is actually a good thing I believe. We *do* need to come to God with all our worries and doubts. But the Israelites in the desert came with an attitude that they deserve something, it's owed to them, as their entitlement. But of course, the grace of God and his provision of water in the desert, or of the living water for the woman, is never something deserved or earned. It's a free gift of God's mercy and grace. The faith lesson I therefore see in this story is to trust God's provision, accept it humbly as an *underserved* gift, and give thanks when it comes.

I feel this faith lesson is even more pertinent for us who live in a privileged society. I feel like we grumble a lot in our country. We grumble if the petrol prices go up. We grumble if we are caught in a traffic jam. We grumble if we are too busy. We grumble if we turn on the tap and the water has been cut off for half an hour for maintenance. All first world problems! What if we didn't even have any car to drive, job to go to, or running water of any kind? Do we feel we deserve these things as our right, or are we humbly thankful for them. In the same way, do we feel we deserve the grace of God or are we humbly thankful as undeserving receivers of this gift?

Two stories. When we place the Israelites' story beside the woman's story, what stands out?

What stands out to me is that it doesn't matter if we grumble or not. It doesn't matter if we are confused like Nicodemus. It doesn't matter if we are like the woman showing cautious but open faith in that stranger by the well. It doesn't matter if we are like the ungrateful and entitled Israelites. In every case God is the same – his grace is poured out to us like living water, as a free gift, regardless, whether we think we deserve it or not. The message of the gospel doesn't change depending on the person or their situation. It simply invites us to receive the gift of living water, and share it with others, as much as we can and as often as we can.