

Resources and the Source

The Bible readings set for today are interesting ones for a service at Cantley Church, because they are both, in a way, parables of physical resources (water supplies; but also food); and resources, or the shortage of them, are an issue in Cantley. The village is best known for its factory (which isn't the local hub it once was); it has a pub and a village hall (and developed plans to make that a much more resourceful facility). But there's no shop; the school has closed and the church offers only very occasional worship. And now there is the possibility of a large quantity of new housing, raising questions about whether there are sufficient resources (such as sewage treatment) for an enlarged population. Of course, there's a fairly decent road out of the village, and a railway station: one answer will be that people will be able to access resources (employment, shopping, education) elsewhere – just as the disciples left Jesus at the well while they went into the city (actually a small town) to buy food. But if people have to access everything elsewhere, it makes it harder to build that sense of community which is an important aspect of wellbeing, offering support to neighbours during times of vulnerability and resilience when facing challenging times – such as those presented by Covid 19 or the Beast from the East. What we read in John Chapter 4 would never have happened if Jesus and the unnamed woman hadn't had their conversation at a community resource: the well which supplied the town with water. Jacob's well would have been much more than just a water source: it would have been the equivalent of today's coffee shop, or office water cooler, or school gate: a meeting place where neighbours are encountered, information is shared, views are expressed and relationships are built. There are suggestions that the woman, given a marital history which would have attracted disapproval, was avoiding such company by opting to fetch water in the heat of the day. Villages, enlarged or not, benefit from such places – and they are less likely to be the village shop or pub of old.

Or church. But churches are more than places of community: they are a spiritual resource, where we encounter God. Just as Jesus turned the subject of conversation from his desire to quench his thirst to people's need for living water, churches make us consider the vertical as well as the horizontal dimension of life. In rural Norfolk our churches are ancient and steeped in the tradition of past generations – just as the woman refers to the Samaritan traditions surrounding Jacob's well (he used the well himself and left it to the people) and Mount Gerizim behind it (once the site of a Samaritan temple to the Lord). Can we speculate that this church might be renewed as a spiritual resource for an enlarged Cantley in years to come? Who knows? Its current state (in the care of the Diocesan Church Trust, providing minimal maintenance, but enabling occasional worship) neither encourages, nor precludes such future developments. If God wants to strike water from this particular rock, well and good. What's more important is that spiritual conversations and considerations happen somewhere – and that could be in a village hall (a contemporary well) as much as in a parish church.

The woman spoke of her Samaritan traditions, parallel to those of Jerusalem, but despised by most Jews (and therefore less familiar to us, because most of the scriptures derive from Judah and the Jews). But Jesus, while affirming Jewish precedence, doesn't accuse her of heresy. Rather he announces that he has come to introduce a life-giving relationship with God, through him, which transcends the old traditional ways – and the divisions they can cause. He signals that, to his returning disciples' astonishment, by daring to converse with a Samaritan woman. The kind of worshippers the Father seeks is those *who worship in spirit and in truth*. What Jesus offers, compared with the still, dead water from the depths of Jacob's well, is a *spring of [living] water gushing up to eternal life*.

As followers of Jesus Christ, our church buildings, like the rest of our traditions, have to be of secondary importance. Yes, like Jacob's well, these are long-standing, deep places, which resource us. Yes, like Mount Gerizim, they point heavenwards, providing a fitting place for worship, drawing on the traditions of our Church. We may well treasure them; rejoicing that they continue to nourish our spiritual lives, or mourning that they are not as well-inhabited as they used to be. But they are secondary: what matters ultimately is our life-giving relationship with the Father through Jesus Christ. Our buildings and traditions are resources; he is the source. Like the woman leaving her water jar behind, one day these tents may need to be folded up, that the body of Christ may move on.

And it is as the body of Christ that we have come together today: some from the village of Cantley; some from other churches. It's great to be using this building for its intended purpose: as a place to house the worship of God and where Christ's presence is celebrated in the Eucharist. But next Sunday many here will be gathering in a different local church: like the Israelites in the wilderness pitching their tents at another water source; like Jesus breaking his journey at the well outside Sychar. Increasingly the relevant question needs to be not, *Is there a service at our church next Sunday?* But *Where is the body of Christ gathering next Sunday – and can I be there?* The Israelites sinned by asking, *Is the Lord among us or not?* But we are confident that the Lord is among us, the Lord is here, not because this is a sacred building, but because we are the body of Christ, seeking to worship God in spirit and in truth.