

Sung Eucharist Lent III

In August 1665, a bundle of linen arrived from London in the small village of Eyam in Derbyshire. In this bale of damp cloth lurked fleas. George Viccars, a tailor's assistant, decided to hang the cloth in front of the fire to dry it and in doing so stirred the fleas to life. The fleas carried the plague and George died in appalling agony on 7 September. The disease spread quickly through the village, with 42 villagers dead by the beginning of the new year. As villagers threatened to flee, the newly appointed rector William Mompesson intervened, deciding that the village should be quarantined to stop people taking the plague to nearby Sheffield or Bakewell. The rector was remarkably unpopular, as he had displaced the previous minister – Thomas Stanley - who had refused to sign the Act of Uniformity in 1662, but Mompesson persuaded Stanley, who lived on the edge of the village, to join him in commending this plan of action. From June they quarantined the village with food sent across by the Earl of Devonshire. The losses were extraordinary, with several families losing all their children in swift succession. In late August 1666, Mompesson walked with his wife, Catherine, who spoke of a sweet smell in the air – by the morning she was died. And yet by November the plague had claimed its last victim in Eyam, and while probably about two thirds of the village died, countless others beyond it had been saved.

It is hard to imagine such sacrifices in our own day, where generations shaped by individualism prioritise their own comfort and convenience before the welfare of others. Think of the young Russian, Alla Illyina, who this week escaped from quarantine in St Petersburg to post a video on Instagram declaring, "I have a right to my freedom". While it would be easy to castigate the selfie generation, we hear in Exodus that trust in community and in God was absent many generations before. Having seen the Lord bring them out of Egypt, we are told, in their thirst, tested the LORD, saying, "Is He among us, or not?"

But whereas the Israelites demand water to slake their thirst, in John we encounter God himself who asking for water. The exchange between Jesus and the Samaritan woman is probably one of the finest pieces of dialogue in the Bible. Ostensibly it's a discussion about water and yet it takes both Jesus and the woman somewhere else entirely. Let me explain why.

First, note that women were expected to collect water at dawn and dusk. Her presence at noon when men would have gathered, would have been deemed improper.

Moreover, she was a Samaritan, and so convention should have had her shunned by Jesus.

Undeterred on both counts, however, he addresses her. What follows is a sparring match, which, if not flirtatious, is certainly feisty: the woman knows her stuff, keeping Jesus on his toes, and what begins as a conversation about water leads to the source of eternal life itself - its climax coming as Jesus tells her, echoing the revelation of God himself in the burning bush, 'I am he.'

Unlike the respected rabbi, Nicodemus, meeting Jesus in the dead of night and departing a doubter, this woman of many husbands and far from the ideal of social and religious respectability has eyes to see what others do not: the Word has been made flesh and stands before her, full of grace and truth and *she* comprehends it. She returns to her people, becomes an evangelist herself, even as at the same time his own disciples return, ignoring the unorthodox encounter, and urge him to eat something. Yet his own conversation with this bright and lively woman has nurtured his own vocation, his own understanding of his purpose and destination: he responds sharply, "I have food to eat that you know nothing about." Jesus even goes on to spend two days with the Samaritans who – like the citizens of Nineveh in the book of Jonah – recognise more readily than his own disciples the purposes of God ("this man really is the Saviour of the world", they tell others).

Two stories then, rooted in experiences of thirst and yet with two very different outcomes: one leading to yet further confusion in the wilderness and one leading to life in all its fullness.

Our walk through the wilderness this Lent is beginning to present us with challenges few of us could have imagined on Ash Wednesday. Questions of how we keep safe and help others, particularly the elderly and vulnerable; challenges that may require sacrifices unimaginable in peacetime, not least the advice of the Government that many really ought to contract the virus in order to protect others come the winter – so called 'herd immunity'. All of this will require a deeper trust in each other than in our society is used to. Yet – as with the villagers of Eyam – it also draws from us a deeper acknowledgment that, as Paul puts it, suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. *That* hope is revealed in the bread we receive today – what St Ignatius called the 'medicine of immortality' - that reveals to us that when *we* were still powerless', Christ died for *us*.

As we stand with one foot in Heaven in the Presence of Christ this morning, may we be given nourishment to be faithful in prayer, to abound in hope, and step forward trusting that whatever tribulations we encounter in the weeks and months ahead, we here are given that spring of water welling up to eternal life. Glory awaits us.