

CHICHESTER CATHEDRAL

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| Date: | 8 March 2026 |
| Service: | Eucharist, Third Sunday of Lent |
| Preacher: | The Dean, The Very Revd Dr Edward Dowler |

In today's gospel we have just heard St John's lengthy account of Jesus's exchange with a woman near to Jacob's well in Sychar, today known as Nablus. He tells her that he will give the living water gushing up to eternal life. And it is for this reason that this gospel reading has traditionally been set for the third Sunday in Lent as we start to look towards Easter: the time above all other times for people to be baptised, confirmed and brought into the life of the Church.

The discourse about the living water thus encourages candidates for baptism to long for the living waters in which they will be united with Christ and given the gift of the Holy Spirit. There's a lovely description from the Church in north Africa in the fifth century of the candidates for baptism walking together to the font on Easter eve, all singing Psalm 42: 'As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.' Jesus says to the woman that 'those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty: the water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life'. This coming Easter, we also will be able to renew the promises that we made, or that were made on our behalf, on the special day when we were baptised.

However, even for those of us who have been washed in the life-giving waters of baptism – at whatever stage of life that happened – there are times of what we might call spiritual dryness when we would like to feel those living waters welling up in us, but we just don't. May I suggest two ways perhaps to try and deal with that.

First of all, we can perhaps overrate the importance of our feelings at any given moment. Of course, we all want to feel a sense of spiritual engagement; that the gospel and the Christian faith are not just external things but are taking root in our hearts; that the living waters are welling up in us. And while it is good to

hope for that, in a culture which expects instant results and lived experience, we can easily be disheartened when we just don't feel it.

In relation to this, I always think of someone whom many of us will remember Mother – now Saint – Teresa of Calcutta who with her community the Missionaries of Charity did amazing work among the poorest people in the city. Everyone – including the sisters who were very close to her in her community – saw her as a serene and devout person, constantly animated by a sense of God's constant presence in her life. But it seems they all got it wrong. Mother Teresa's letters, published some years after her death, revealed her to have spent the majority of her life in spiritual darkness and aridity. 'In my soul I feel just that terrible pain of loss – of God not wanting me – of God not being God – of God not really existing'. If she'd been led by her feelings, Teresa would have given up, but as it was she kept on saying her prayers and doing her amazing work of serving Christ in the poor, and that perseverance I suppose became itself the living water that was able to keep her going.

And then finally, I would like to offer a reflection that I came across recently on the two seas in the Holy Land, originally written in the 1920s. The first of the two seas is the Sea of Galilee in the northern part of the country around which Jesus spent much of his ministry. The river Jordan flows into it from the north and then runs out at the other end. So the Sea of Galilee is constantly being replenished by the river Jordan and then constantly giving out into it again at the other end. It has fresh, clear water – exactly the sort of water that would have been described as 'living' in ancient times, and thus supports fish and vegetation.

After it leaves the Sea of Galilee, the River Jordan heads down south and eventually goes into the Dead Sea which is at the lowest point on earth, so no water flows ever out of it. It is stagnant and so salty that no fish or plant life can survive in it.

'This is the difference', writes the author of the little parable about these two, 'the Sea of Galilee receives but does not keep the Jordan. For every drop that flows into it, another drop flows out. The giving and receiving go on in equal measure. The other sea is shrewder, hoarding its income... It will not be tempted into any generous impulse. Every drop it gets it keeps. The sea of Galilee gives and lives. The other sea gives nothing. It is named the Dead.' The Sea of Galilee is able to be a living sea because it is constantly being replenished and constantly giving out again, by contrast with its dead and stagnant cousin which only receives but never gives. Perhaps then if we want to

know those living waters that Jesus talks about to well up in us, the secret is for we ourselves to be seeking – whatever way we can – to give them out again.