

Reflection on Exodus 17:1–7 and John 4:1–30, 39–41

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We have endured much since the first significant bushfire outbreak in September 2019. Just as communities across our country take initial steps on the long road of bushfire recovery, we find ourselves confronted by a threat of another kind—COVID-19 and its impact on travel, markets and trade, large gatherings of all sorts, and, of course, the obvious concerns for our health and the well-being of others.

Besides the imminent threats, the coronavirus outbreak also has the potential to tap into deeper memories and fears that are unrelated but connected. Anxieties we may have about our mortality may surface, for example, as may feelings of repulsion towards illness and weakness in general. Past grief may be triggered, as well as unconscious prejudices and fear of the other.

A reaction I noticed in myself this week highlighted for me the state in which this sustained period of concern and threat may have left many of us.

Over the last couple of weeks, we've been addressing an infestation of mice and rats who are leaving trails of their obvious presence and destruction in the church and hall. Then on Thursday afternoon, I ran into an employee from Baker's Delight who had a tank of pesticide on his back and was spraying cockroaches that were pouring out onto the footpath in front of the shops on Jetty Road.

This was the last straw for me. What I noticed in myself was less concern for the actual pest—be it mice, rats or cockroaches—and more the feeling of absolute dread. For a brief moment, I felt an intense sense of invasion... What will be next?... Is there no escape?... *How will I survive?*

My fleeting reaction was obviously not about the cockroaches on the footpath or any real danger I was facing, but a result of the stress of the *sustained period of high alert* we've been on over these months. And I have enjoyed relative security and health!

Nevertheless, it is no wonder that when I went home on Thursday, I spent much of the evening watching ABC comedy shows before dinner followed by a two-hour rom-com on

Netflix afterwards in the safety of my bed. Not even a book could bring the emotional detachment and mindlessness I needed at that time.

In contrast to my experience of dread and subsequent escapism, today's scripture readings speak of people on a journey with God towards liberation and love.

For some, like the Israelites travelling through the wilderness, the bondage was real—they were being liberated from slavery in Egypt. But today's scene of complaint and lack of trust reveals their greatest need was to be freed from that which bound their hearts and minds; that is, the lingering effect of trauma on their mindset and behaviours.

Less apparent to us perhaps is the Gospel community's need for liberation from prejudice and disunity. This second-generation community was a volatile mix of once zealously religious Jews, gentile converts to the faith, and Samaritans. As we heard, Jews did not share things in common with Samaritans given what was essentially a long-held family feud between them. But now, through their faith in Jesus, these estranged cousins found themselves gathered around the communion table, forced to break bread together.

Lest we think this was a smooth, idealistic transition—a “For everyone born, a place at the table” kind of moment—today's story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well sought to speak directly into the tensions and divisions that remained between the two groups within the community. Enmities from which this Gospel intends to free us.

For this reason, I join with those who see the Samaritan woman as a representative figure in John's Gospel. In other words, this nameless woman need not be understood to be a real, historic individual, but *a literary device used to represent Samaritans in general*. With this view, we discover the possibility that this story may not so much be about another fallen woman in need of redemption and forgiveness. But rather, the Gospel presents for us *the re-turn to God of the Samaritan people*. They have been unfaithful but, through their faith in Jesus as the Messiah, they, too, are enfolded into the beloved community.

In this representative view, the five husbands of the Samaritan woman are not real men, but the five gods of the neighbouring countries which the Northern Kingdom (where Samaria was located) had assimilated into their own faith and culture. The infidelity, then, is not a result of a lack of *personal morality* but is the result of a congregation of people turning to something other than God as the Source of Life and Love... it is a wavering of trust and faith in God. *And this is something with which we can all identify.*

At this time of sustained threat and fear, we may be wondering: *From where will our help come? As information comes to us fast-and-furiously and seems to change and grow bleaker by the day, whose word can we trust? how shall we be?*

It occurs to me the empty toilet paper shelves in the shops are a symbol of the misguided attempts to take control and quell the anxiety... a metaphorical bowing down to gods of our own making.

But we gather in hope, seeking another way. We gather around the table with Christ in a kind of defiance against the waves of fear. And here, for me, the words of anchorite Julian of Norwich come to mind. She was herself living through the first outbreak of the bubonic plague in Europe when Julian offered this inspired encouragement:

God did not say, "You will not be tormented, you will not be troubled, you will not be dis-eased"; but God said, "You shall not be overcome."

Julian of Norwich's words do not negate the need for precautions and care nor do they relieve us of personal and corporate responsibility. But they do reorient our hearts and minds back to the One who is our help and the keeper of our lives. The God who holds us in life and death provides all the kindness, compassion and wisdom we need. God may not rescue us from illness, but we will not be overcome... we can be free of fear.



The image of liberating love offered to us by God in Jesus is depicted in the photograph of the statue on the front of our order of service. Many of us will remember Geraldine Hawkins from the South Australian Council of Churches introducing this image to us when she visited in 2018.

Much is portrayed in this compelling image. But today, as I look at it with the events of these months echoing within and around us, I see and hear many things including:

- An unbroken, free-flowing connection between the two figures... one merging into the other... indistinguishable at points... which speaks to me of abiding and a oneness of heart, soul and mind...
- Woman leaning onto Jesus... resting herself on him... deep intimacy and trust expressed with eye contact and the closeness of their faces...

- How might we, when we feel worried and uncertain, turn to God and connect with the spring of true life within us? What would such a turning to God include for you? pause from frantic activity or even escapism? a deep breath when you feel afraid? prayer? silence and meditation?
- Jesus' body emerging out of the depths of the well... water filling the bowl the figures hold between them... water flowing over the bowl, over the sides of the well itself...
- In this anxious time, we might be tempted to pull away... to hoard and withhold out of a sense of scarcity... But what might it be to trust and carry within ourselves a spirit of abundance? to have confidence in the Source of Goodness that wells up and continues to flow over in our world?
- And like the woman at the well—the first apostle in the Gospel of John—how might we be bearers of hope, trust and faith at this time... sharing *good news* and showing courage in the face of fear? Might we lead in that other way of Jesus?

I'd like to conclude with a prayer by Julian of Norwich who, like us, faced many threats and anxieties in her time. In her Spirit inspired visions, the following prayer arose in her:

God, of your goodness, give me yourself;
 you are enough for me,
 and anything less that I could ask for
 would not be worthy of you.
 And if I ask anything that is less,
 I shall always lack something,
 but in you alone I have everything.

All shall be well. All shall be well...

The Season of Lent invites us to withdraw for a while from the press and busyness of life... to make time to be with God in the wilderness—whatever that might look like for each of us—in order to attend to deep and lasting things.

It is a season where we are invited to notice with greater intention the force of Spirit blowing in our lives... stripping away that which is not life-giving... allowing the Spirit to clear and expand our hearts and minds for a truer, more authentic friendship with God and others.

It is a season that invites honesty—with ourselves and others, of course, but also *with God* from whom nothing is hidden and who is closer to us than we are even to ourselves.

Today's scripture readings share some common threads that also raise some common questions, such as:

- For what do we hunger and thirst? In other words, what is our desire at this time?
- How does our desire *orient us* in life? *to whom or what* does our desire turn us?

As we prepare to hear God's word for us this day, let us take a moment to bring to mind our deep hunger and thirst... What is your desire at this time?

With this awareness of our desire, let us listen with the ear of our heart for the voice of God speaking to each of us.