

St Bartholomew's Burnley, Sunday 8th March 2026

(Third Sunday in Lent)

There are several themes in today's readings that the preacher could address. I am going to reflect for a few minutes on four of them, -the theme of Struggle, the theme of Trust, the theme of faith and the theme of discipleship. Common to all our readings is God's benevolent care, grace and concern for all who seek his love and assurance.

In today's Old Testament lesson, the Israelites are struggling. In the wilderness they say to Moses, "Give us water to drink". It is hard to overcome fear when the going gets tough. The Israelites are beginning to waver. They doubt whether they have done the right thing in leaving Egypt and following Moses. They were asking the question, is God really with us. They are thirsty and Moses is struggling with an answer. I suspect many of us are the same.

Whether we are a leader or one of the followers. In trying times our faith and belief is put to the test. Here are some examples of our struggles from time to time.

- We struggle with fragility, or an illness.
- We struggle with family matters, divorce relationships, sexuality, unemployment and having an adequate income,
- We struggle at work with the increasing demands and expectations of employers to increase productivity

- We struggle with political, and commercial leaders who find it difficult to name the challenges with honesty and hide behind ideology and self-interest,
- We struggle to stay in the church. We even struggle with belief and faith at times.
- We struggle with change at many different levels of our life.
- .We struggle with acts of terrorism and conflicts in the Ukraine and the Middle East including the destruction of Gaza

In last weeks Gospel we heard the story of the conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus. Nicodemus is struggling to comprehend the true meaning of discipleship, of following in the footsteps of Jesus , and modeling his own faith and life on a vision where the gifts of God are shared among all and the need to live one's life for the other, than for ones self. Nicodemus functions as a leader of the Jews with a rich tradition behind him and is confronted with a new way of thinking about faith and his obligations to others. He could be described as a straight man for Jesus allowing the Gospel writer to engage in a lengthy conversation and dialogue.

Like Nicodemus coming to Jesus in the dark of night and away from prying eyes and witnesses and at great risk to himself the Samaritan woman is presented in the open with the radical news of the message of Jesus. Jesus knows all about the woman he meets at the well. He knows about her life style and is not put off by her presence and questions. Unlike Nicodemus the woman seems to “get it” as we say -

or at least it seems so when she responds with the words, come and see a man who told me everything I have done. He cannot be the Messiah can he?"

Jesus has travelled the hot road and desert probably engaging in conversation with many on the way. He is tired and thirsty when he meets the woman and without hesitation ask for a drink of water from the well. What begins is the longest conversation with Jesus recorded in the bible and significantly with a woman.

We do not know her name or age. The time is probably the middle of the day with a blazing sun. When the woman appears with a clay jar, Jesus asks for a drink. She reminds him this is not proper. He is crossing boundaries. She appears confident and unlike Nicodemus who comes to Jesus in the darkness she comes in the light of day. You are a Jew and I a Samaritan she says to him. Jesus appears to ignore her response and instead offers her a drink. This confuses the woman. "You do not have a bucket to draw water from the well, she says . Jesus appears to ignore her response and instead offers life and a bold promise,

Who ever drinks the water I give will never thirst. The self-revelation of who Jesus is unfolding in both stories. Through along and challenging conversation, the woman, who according to some suggests a person of tarnished status and the Samaritans who she represents, are disliked, and ostracized by the Jewish authorities. The woman, however unlike Nicodemus recognises Jesus for who he is and asks for the water he speaks about. As soon as she does this the conversation turns to her life and Jesus tells her everything she has done. She immediately sees him in a different light and then

spreads the news among those considered as outsiders. Nicodemus the insider and the woman the outsider are contrasted. It is the outsider who responds.

The disciples we are told who go off for food appear scandalized when they return to see Jesus in a lonely place talking to an unaccompanied woman at the well. What on earth is this man doing they now? If they had known more perhaps, they would have not been scandalized? Jesus identifies and offers life to all not only those who claim to be of the household of faith.

Water is the central symbol in both the Exodus story of the Old Testament and the Gospel reading. The right to water is fundamental to our survival both physically and spiritually. Thousands of children die each year because of polluted water or no access to water. In other countries woman are the water carriers from distant wells. In other places water is under threat by commercial operators who wish to privatize this gift of life. Think about this each time you buy a bottle of water.

It is water that Jesus gives to the woman. Water that springs from God's ever-flowing generosity and love. Water that is for everyone not just the privileged and insider. Water that is for the home comer and the reformer. Water is essential to our well-being and Jesus rather than judging or discrimination against her offers her friendship and hope.

How do we hear this news? How does it help us in our daily struggles? How do we hear the essence or core of Jesus' teaching that lies not on one's sexuality, gender, background, marriage or divorce,

not even about sin but rather about a generosity of spirit, about living a flourishing and fully human life that embraces difference, diversity and love. Nicodemus came in the dark and left in the dark. The woman meets Jesus in the blazing sun and leaves in the light. The option is ours. She is enthusiastic and excited about this stranger she now embraces. She joins the other women in the bible who speak with commitment and love to all who listen

In my struggles I remember the events of the cross, the journey to Jerusalem that we are travelling through Lent, reminding myself that when I say and do nothing evil prevails. During these challenging times reflect on just one thing you could do to change the community, this parish, and seek to be agents of God's Grace.

Amen.

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