

Shrove Tuesday Sermon - Westcott House

Jeffrey W Bailey - 5 February 2008

Jer. 2: 1-13; John 4:1-26

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

In a recent Diet Coke commercial three beautiful young women crowd into an office elevator, apparently to take a break from work. Moments later one of them then hits the alarm button, stopping the elevator. Then, as if on cue, a buff young repair man slowly lowers himself into their elevator, to the obvious delight of the young women. The desire level on that elevator—and, we might suppose, in a few living rooms across Great Britain—begins to enter the upper registers, but how do the women find satisfaction? While ogling the repair man, they open their cans of Diet Coke, raise it to their lips, and take a drink. Their work break now over, they walk off the elevator, leaving the repair man behind while they deposit empty soda cans in a bin that is overflowing with empty cans of Diet Coke.

Is this advertising at its worst? Yet another example of capitalism's craven tactics to sell us a product? Or—would it possible to claim this as a 30-second miniature dramatization of what Greek philosophers and Christian theologians have always told us: that desire elicited at one level in a person may be channelled and redirected to find fulfilment in something of a higher level?

What counts as higher is, of course, a matter of some debate. Diet Coke wants you to believe that the desire aroused in the women on that elevator by a man in a tool belt can be redirected toward, and more deeply satisfied, by drinking a Diet Coke. Furthermore, they count on the fact that we as viewers are not merely dispassionate observers, but that an elevator full of beautiful people might evoke the very desires being portrayed, thus leading us to the drinking of many Diet Cokes. I have noticed, in fact, that my wife has been buying a lot of Diet Cokes these days, so perhaps I will discuss her recent TV viewing habits with her sometime.

The story played out in that Diet Coke commercial, however, accurately reflects centuries of human wisdom—that human desire is dynamic, and it is malleable. The same desire that can lead one to feel desperate for artificially sweetened carbonated water, can also lead to narcissistic addictions, *and* it can also be nurtured and trained and re-directed toward fulfilments of a higher order.

Interestingly, however, those who deal with these matters—texts which aim to get us to seek the highest expressions of what is good—often do so by attempting to evoke more earthy desires along the way. So, this last week I was supervising some students in a reading of Plato's dialogue, *Phaedrus*, and I was reminded again of how Plato describes the beauty of the natural surroundings with such compelling detail, and the degree to which the dialogue between Socrates and his young pupil are filled with erotic double-entendres. But this is purposeful: for Plato, the desire that human beauty evokes ought trigger something in us, so that we are led by what is right in front of us to seek even higher expressions of that Beauty and Goodness elsewhere.

We see that writers of Scripture attempt to do the same thing. Take the Old Testament book of Proverbs, where Wisdom is portrayed not as some dull duty or merely rational quest; Wisdom, rather, is portrayed as this beguiling, desirable woman, one to seek out, and chase after. Or take the writings of the church fathers; Origen or Gregory of Nyssa can be almost embarrassing in the desirous language they use to describe one's relationship with God.

The Church has understood, in other words, that not only is desire essential to being human, but that for all its difficulties and ambiguities and mis-directions, desire is essential to leading us into a life with God. And, like Plato, as well as the marketers of Diet Coke, Scripture is not afraid to draw on narrative strategies which can evoke such desire.

I think we see something of that narrative strategy in tonight's reading from John's Gospel, in which Jesus encounters a Samaritan woman of questionable history at a well. It's a scene I can almost imagine as a film—perhaps an Italian film from the 1960s, something directed by Pasolini, all black and white neo-realism with long, languid pauses and lingering close-ups.

So, picture the scene: a man sits down in an open space, now absolutely barren of people in the heat of the day, and waits. Into the frame steps the lone figure of a woman. The well looms large in the background. Not only is it Jacob's Well, a holy site for Israel, but in everyone's memory would have been the repeatedly-told stories of Jacob and Isaac meeting their wives at wells.

Custom and propriety, not to mention Israel's deeply-seated racism against the Samaritans, dictated that no interaction take place. And so when the man speaks to the woman, our attention is drawn to what she would surely have heard as a flirtatious overture. "Give me a drink," he says. If that is not enough, moments later he is enquiring about her husband—to which she answers with a reply carefully crafted to be heard in multiple ways: "I have no husband."

What is John's Gospel doing here? Are we being drawn into a first-century equivalent of two people stepping onto an elevator together, breaking the taboos of not speaking, and conversing in the banter of hidden subtexts?

Perhaps. But that would make sense, because if this passage is about anything, it is about desire: desire for relief from sun-parched thirst; desire that leads a Samaritan woman from one man to another; and desire for water that satisfies more deeply than what has thus far been experienced.

This final element is introduced by Jesus. With echoes of Socrates' skill of leading conversations in unanticipated directions, and displaying the abilities of a spiritual master adept at re-directing a person's desire, Jesus introduces what must have been a puzzling new option for the woman. "Actually, you should be asking me for water," he says. "Because I have *living* water to give you."

Surprisingly, perhaps, she doesn't appear to display any cynicism about this claim. Rather, her response is simply, "You don't have a bucket. How are you going to get this water?"

Actually, that's not precisely what she says. We might *expect* her to say this, to ask how; it would seem a natural question: "without a bucket, *how* exactly do you suppose you are going to get this water that you say is on offer?" But in our reading tonight she says, "*Where* are you going to get this water?"

To ask *where*, however, is to suggest that this is something one must go looking for. It is the language of searching, of journeying; *where* is the language of being propelled by a desire to find something. And it is language all of us intrinsically understand, for to be on such a search is to be human: to find the people, the places, the tasks, the sets of skills, the jobs, the congregations, that will in some ways answer the yearning that is within us. *Where* is the language of desire, in all its restless energy.

This is not a bad thing. On the contrary! It is this restlessness which leads us into our relationship with God. It is the restlessness that emerges from satisfied desires—full stomachs on Shrove Tuesday!—that, in their very satisfaction point beyond themselves to the possibility of satisfactions of an even greater nature. It is the restlessness that emerges out of dissatisfied desires, the broken cisterns that point beyond themselves to a healing and redemption that we still hope to fully experience. It is a restlessness that is intrinsic to being human.

But there is another side to this story. The gift of desire is its restlessness, but the *difficulty* of desire is also its restlessness—its constant eagerness for the new thing, the next possibility, the future horizon.

And it is this other, rather paradoxical, side of the story that Jesus seems to point to in what he tells the woman next. The living water you are searching for, he says, cannot be obtained by going in search of it. This is water that must burst forth from an internal well, from inside the person.

If this was a difficult notion for the woman to understand, it is no less so for us. Desire that leads us in search of external wells may be an arduous journey, full of difficulties and unforeseen challenges—but they at least are external, and thus quantifiable, and hold out at least the *promise* of being somewhat manageable. You attach a bucket, you lower it into the well, and you pull out water. If there isn't water there, or if it's gone a bit stale, you ask directions and go off in search of another one. Well-searching, even when the maps are not clear, can at least be a project, a task.

Internal wells—wells out of which springs of living water gush up into eternal life, as Jesus put it—these are of a different order. How do you dig internal wells? Where does one go, what does one do, for such sources of life to spring forth?

One can almost imagine the woman asking Jesus those questions, and one can almost imagine Jesus answering her, saying: "Its doesn't matter where you go, or what you do. Internal wells must be dug right where you are. The challenge of digging that well will not be made easier by moving to a new place, or occupying yourself with a new task. For the same well will need to be dug there, too. So you are best off simply beginning where you are."

Such an answer can seem counter-intuitive, however. We are better at searching for water; we are less sure of ourselves when we have to wait for water to come to us.

The only thing we can do, then, is to slowly, unconfidently attempt to dig such internal wells as best we can. In doing so, we find ourselves caught in a paradoxical tension of desire for God, which leads us relentlessly forward—and the challenge of remaining still long enough for internal wells of God's life-giving water to spring forth.

I remember some years ago searching for ways in which to dig such internal wells, and found myself reading a lot of Buddhism, in particular the Dalai Lama and Thich Nhat Hanh. A central spiritual practice within Buddhism is deep attentiveness to what is right in front of you, a gentle mindfulness of what you are doing in the moment: if you are pouring the tea, you are pouring the tea. If you are washing the cup, you are washing the cup.

In time, this led me to the deep resources in the Christian tradition of contemplative prayer, in which one gently places oneself before God, but withdraws from words or thoughts. In much of prayer we quite rightly ask God for things, we express anxiety about current difficulties, we seek guidance for upcoming decisions. But in contemplative prayer, we simply seek to be before God, to open ourselves to God, and nothing else.

Contemplative prayer is perhaps one way, amidst a myriad of ways, in which we create space for the digging of internal wells, where we learn to dwell in the paradoxical tensions of desire for God. For while desire leads us to sit down to pray, the wordless silence of *contemplative* prayer acts as a kind of ascetic withdrawal from desire's tendency to grasp, to make plans, to control. It is a way of moving more deeply into what Gregory of Nyssa called "dispassionate passion": a desire for God that paradoxically requires that we learn inner detachment.

Tonight, as we come toward the end of Shrove Tuesday—with Ash Wednesday now only hours away—we dwell, as it were, on a seam of that paradox—joining a time of feasting to a time of fasting, a time of quenched thirst to a time of broken cisterns, a time of desire to a time of detachment.

Thus, in a few minutes we will go next door and feast together in formal hall. This is exactly what we should be doing.

Tomorrow, we will enter into a season of fasting, of detachment, of staying still, of creating space for new wells of living water to well up inside.

But we will do so remembering the feasting that led us to that place.

And we will remember the feasting that is yet to come.

Amen.