

Christ Church, Georgetown
Sermon, March 19, 2017, 11:15 p.m.
Lent 3: Exodus 17:1-17, Romans 5:1-11, John 4:5-42
The Reverend Timothy A. R. Cole

These last few days I have been on retreat at the Society of St John the Evangelist's monastery in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

When I was walking around the town I found a book on a park bench. It was in excellent condition, and turned out to be one of those outreach books produced by the Jehovah's Witnesses. For a few reasons I wouldn't normally read their material, but ultimately because I know they are not Trinitarian Christians. To be technical they are Arians because, like Arius, they believe Jesus was not part of the eternal Trinity, but a created being. Arians said of Jesus that, "There was a time when he was not." This book, though, simply contained a whole collection of personal testimonies: Stories of how people had, through encountering Christ, come through the storms of life -- some pretty terrible storms too. Abuse, addiction, bereavement, and despair were in many of them. In most there was a strong conversion experience followed by a lapse, or several lapses, back into the old destructive ways they were trying to leave behind. Salvation and the beginning of a better life doesn't come easy.

In one, a woman described her heart as a cold black stone. She described how it took many waves of Christ's love and forgiveness to replace that heart with a living and loving one.

These rags to riches, gutter to stars, hell to heaven, type stories normally leave me a little uncomfortable. Life is not that dramatic for most of us, I usually think. These are loud stories chosen for maximum impact. They seem too simplistic somehow.

And yet, I happened also to be reading the currently widely talked about book by David Vince, *A Hillbilly Elegy*, where, much to my surprise, I discovered that Hillbillies come from Scotland! Well, Ireland as well: But the Scottish part was a shock. The only portrayals of Hillbillies I had ever seen in films were of mentally subnormal men in dungarees who are likely to do very unpleasant things to you if they catch you in the woods!

The Hillbillies David Vince describes are very different from that stereotype, and much more familiar to me. I recognized them. The people in the mining village I grew up in outside Edinburgh were not that different: Tough people leading tough lives in good times, and very tough lives in bad times: People fiercely loyal to one another and, mostly, equally suspicious of education and the educated classes: People who would recognize the stories in that book as being all too familiar in their communities. I think that is what gave me pause when I picked it up off the bench.

In this morning's Gospel, we have the story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well. It is a wonderful encounter and she is a vivid character. You can see that she is teasing Jesus. He may be this powerful preacher and teacher, and he may have some very fine words to say, but you get the sense that she thinks she has the measure of him from the beginning. She knows pretty well what men are about, and -- whatever he may say -- he is, in her eyes, just another man. She refuses to take him seriously. She is all practicalities and attempts to burst his holy bubble. To Jesus' offer of living water she says, "Sir, you have no bucket and the well is deep." To his amazing words, "The water I will give will become... a spring of water gushing up to

eternal life,” she says, “Sir give me this water so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water.” To my ear, there is a playful and mocking tone in her words.

It is only when Jesus reveals that he knows all about her and her five husbands that she begins to be unsettled. Like most people when they are confronted with spiritual truth, she seeks immediately to hide behind theology and tradition. “Sir, I see you are prophet. Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you say that the place people must worship is Jerusalem.”

But even here Jesus cuts through all her evasion. “God is spirit, and those that worship him must worship in spirit and in truth.” Finally, the woman realizes that Jesus really is something completely different. She makes one final attempt to keep some distance between herself and this strangely disturbing man: A man who, unlike any other man she has ever known, speaks truth to her without any of the usual agenda. She says, “I know the Messiah is coming.” The subtext being, “Then of course everything will change, but not now.” But when Jesus says, “I am he, the one who is speaking to you,” she realizes that she cannot but believe him. There is no subtext left: Just life changing truth: A spring of clear, spirit-filled water gushing up to eternal life.

What is this spring that can be opened in us that gushes up to eternal life? In his talk at the Quiet Morning last week, Father Martin Smith gave an account of how, as a young man, he had searched for a lost ancient well in the North of England. He thought he knew where it was, but spent a whole day searching the fields without success. Late in the day, however, he saw some cows in the corner of a field and, screwing his courage to the sticking place (he really does not like cows!), he shooed them away and then scraped around in the sloppy mud and cow dung. There, in all the muck, he found a stone with a hole in it, and when he thrust his arm down into the muck and cleared the filth out of the hole, a bright spring of crystal clear water bubbled up in front of him.

His point was how the living water Christ talks about is also found in the very midst of the muck and the mire of life and ourselves. He’d been searching everywhere else for the well, but there it was, guarded by the cows and their dung. The spring of living water is not in our fine thoughts and aesthetic aspirations, but in the dark and visceral parts of our deepest selves. Nearer the subtext of our basic humanity than in our vain attempts to intellectualize our existence.

I go a long way with this image. I do think the water that Jesus is talking about is not just a wonderful deep spiritual experience (though it may well be that too). It is about our whole lives and our whole being.

Where the image is not complete for me is that I think we are often unable ourselves to reach down and clear the mire away to unblock the spring. Sometimes it is just too deep, or the filth just keeps filling it up again. Sometimes our hurts are too severe, or the chains we have allowed ourselves to be bound in are too strong for us to break them ourselves. Often, we can’t do it alone. We need someone like Moses, striking the rock at Horeb, to strike our hearts of stone so that the living water might flow. We need Christ to do for us what he does with the woman at the well: To cut through the mud and mire of our lives and to make us see.

I think what the testimonies I found in that book on the park bench and *The Hillbilly Elegy* both show in their different ways is that, however tough life can be, whatever we lack, or indeed

whatever we have in material terms, we human beings will always thirst until we find what the Samaritan women found at that well.

As we continue through Lent, if we put ourselves in the Samaritan woman's position by the well, would Jesus find us to be complacent and evasive in some areas of our life? Where would he see mud and mire clogging up the spring in us? What does he need to strip away for the crystal clear waters of the spirit to flow freely in us?