

'Give me water to drink'. Sermon first preached at FUMC Palmetto by Dr Christine Hoffman, 23rd February 2008

I wonder if you spotted what our two scripture readings this morning had in common? In them, there is a very specific demand made. It is a demand for water. The ancient Israelites, tramping through the hot dry wilderness, say to Moses: 'Give us water to drink.' Having escaped hardship in Egypt, they are angry that Moses has brought them to a place where they are about to die of thirst. Moses cries out to God: 'What shall I do with this people?' He then follows God's command to strike the rock from which, much to everyone's amazement, water gushes. Moses then calls the place names in Hebrew which refer to the quarrel the people had with him and their testing of God. In what way, are these people guilty of testing God? It is surely their saying that they will believe in Moses' leadership and that God is with them if this God shows up in the desert and quenches their thirst. I don't know about you, but I have some sympathy with these thirsty people. If you are truly thirsty, you want water. You don't want milk, coffee, your favorite soda. You want your thirst quenching. And water is what's needed. If you are truly thirsty, you don't want a sermon, from Moses, from Christine or from anyone else. Quite legitimately, you say: 'Give us water to drink.' So what's so wrong with that?

I don't think there is anything wrong with that. Nor is there anything wrong in asking God to meet the daily needs of ourselves and others. We bring to our worship, do we not, our petitions and our intercessions. We pray the prayer Jesus himself taught us which includes our asking God to meet our needs. What seems to upset Moses here is his people's attitude to him and to the God he represents. They show that they do not really believe in this God. Because life isn't turning out quite like they thought it should, they dispute the reality of God. Perhaps we are on a wild goose chase here? Moses has taken us for a ride. He tells us that, at the burning bush, he was addressed by a God called 'I am'. Where is this 'I am' now. We were better off before we believed in this God. What sort of God, is he, after all? Well, the God Moses encountered at the burning bush and the God who gave Moses the Law at Mount Sinai is a God who cares for his people. He calls Moses and his people into a covenant relationship with him out of his love for them. They can respond and 'love God right back' or they can reject the offer. Having accepted the offer and become God's chosen people, they are then obligated. They are part of a relationship and this relationship entails particular ways of doing things and looking at things. Fundamentally, it commands each member of the covenant relationship: 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, and soul' as we have it in Deuteronomy. And it commands each member of the covenant relationship: 'Love your neighbor as yourself', as we have it in Leviticus. It is not that we must not love ourselves and this surely includes seeing to our physical needs. But loving God and our neighbors is not based on what we can get out of it. I'll love you God if you will give me – give me everything I believe I require for my life, just how and when I require it. I think that I'm probably only just beginning to get a grasp of what it means to love God. No wonder Jesus quoted those words from Deuteronomy about loving God as the most important commandment. It is, indeed, fundamental and we will spend a lifetime learning to fulfil it. But what Moses' companions seem to have done is to forget that they have entered into a relationship based on love. They are simply bargaining with God. There is no relationship in their attitude as they demand water to determine whether God is real or not. If there were a

relationship, one in which trust, commitment, obedience, and all that's meant by loving God, then they wouldn't be quarrelling and putting God to the test like this.

Now what about the woman at the well? Is there anything wrong with her request for water? Surely not, for remember that in the first instance it is Jesus who asks her: 'Give me a drink'. He is at a well and there someone is drawing water. The unnamed woman and Jesus are both human beings with physical thirst. They need water. What is it then in this conversation that Jesus wants to convey to the woman? He clearly thinks there is something lacking in her life, in her relationship to God and he wants to satisfy more than her physical needs.

Don't you wish we knew the name of this woman? If you were present in worship last week, you may remember that we thought about Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus. We explored a little of how Nicodemus is everyman, of how we resemble him in our attitudes and in what is needed for us to be true disciples of Jesus Christ. So this morning we are, in a sense, taking the woman at the well as everywoman, as everyone. For this is surely why the gospel-writer records this story. I feel I'd like to know her name in order to identify with her better. But John chooses not to tell us. Perhaps he didn't know. Anyway, this is one of the longest conversations that he records between Jesus and anyone and John surely wants the readers of his gospel to learn from it.

This conversation between the woman and Jesus is quite lively. That a conversation takes place at all is remarkable. Long-standing disputes about whether Jerusalem was the supremely holy place for worship of God divided Jews and Samaritans. Jesus as a Jew would not be expected to make contact with a Samaritan. Nor would he be expected to address a woman in public. Jesus shows no concern for such religious and cultural restrictions. In their conversation, he pushes her to a place where she has to recognize her need of God. It is much easier for her simply to stick to questions about her physical need of water and to decoy Jesus with the traditional divisions between Jews and Samaritans. How did John know about this incident? Perhaps from the Samaritan woman herself. Whatever the explanation, he leaves her anonymous and shows her asking questions of Jesus and then adjusting her understanding in the light of both what he says and what he is. What will bring her abundant life not just after death but now in the present is Jesus' revelation of God. She has to realign her whole being. She has to get off concentrating on the location of worship and recognize that true worship is characterized by the total giving of one's life to God. The phrase comes twice: 'worshiping God in spirit and in truth.' Like many phrases that have become familiar to us, it's easy for them to become so much religious jargon. But every time we gather here for worship, or seek to worship God any place else for that matter, we need to ask ourselves why we are here. Are we expecting God to do things for us, to give us stuff? Or are we here in a spirit of surrender and adoration? Are we here because God simply is, because God simply loves us and in Jesus gives us not bits of truth but the whole truth. Loving him is simply true to the nature of the whole universe with God as its loving creator. To worship him in spirit and in truth is to let his transforming energy gives us access to reality.

Let's think for a moment what's truly at stake in the current controversy about teaching evolution in schools. It is often assumed by Christians that evolution is in some way an attack on God. It's as if we think that if we admit to a long and evolutionary process, we are

somehow pushing God out. It is evolution or God. But let's think again what the writers of the first chapters of Genesis were doing. No human being was there with a clipboard at creation writing down the order of things. As you know, the writer of the first chapter of Genesis gives a different order for creation from the writer of the second chapter of Genesis. Both accounts are allowed to stand, side by side. And this because what these writers want to convey is far more important than a description of the precise way in which they came to be. They want to say that only God knows. Only God was there. Human beings are not creators but creatures. But, they are creatures with a unique capacity to understand that God created a good universe and one in which they have responsibility. This responsibility is to God. It is a responsibility to use all the scientific knowledge at our disposal and all the moral and spiritual knowledge at our disposal to care for God's entire creation in ways that seem consonant with his purposes. Now this is what it means to take the first chapters of Genesis seriously. It is not to waste time, as the Samaritan woman was tempted to do, entering into a dispute about something which wasn't really important. Whether you worship on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem or on Mount Gerizim, says Jesus, is not what is important. What is important is that you worship God. What is important to those who are my disciples is that you worship God in the spirit and truth which flow from me. What is important, says Jesus to us, is that you use all your God-given abilities to pursue an understanding of God's world and all its potential for good. What is important is that you look at my life, death, and resurrection and don't fear that God will be defeated or in some way be overwhelmed by human cleverness. He and his purposes are much bigger than that. Your job is not to spend time in dispute because of what challenging conclusions others may come to but to engage with God's world as fully and as responsibly as you can. And it is to turn to God in worship.

To give God all the glory is not some pious phrase. It is to believe and trust in him as the loving creator of each one of us. No scientific exploration can push God out our lives. God gets pushed out only if we, that is, you and I let him be pushed out. He is pushed out if we insist on living on our terms and not on God's terms. He is pushed out if we keep saying to say: 'Give me this. Give me that. I must have these things.' This is to bargain with God for his love. This is to test God. We may criticize those who don't believe in him and we're good at talking about the love of God. But do we ourselves always believe in this God? Do we accept that we are creatures and he is the creator. When we see the infinite variety of his creation, are we threatened by all the complex processes which have gone into this or do we put our trust in the creator behind it all? Do we love God? And this not because of what he might give us as a reward, but because he has given us life itself. And he has done this out of love. To take the love of God seriously is an awesome thing. Like other loves, it calls forth something in us and from us which does not calculate what we might get out of it. It simply enjoys the relationship. God enjoys hanging out with us. This is what the ancient Israelites had to learn in the desert, this is what the Samaritan woman had to learn at the well and this is what we have to learn in our deserts and in our conversations with Jesus. So we don't keep saying: 'God, give me water; God give me this, God give me that'. 'God, give me.' Rather we say, especially, as we gather in worship: 'Give me, God'. That is, 'God, give us yourself.' When we do this, we won't petulantly ask like the Israelites in the desert: 'Is the Lord among us or not?' We won't think that God's reality depends on a particular scientific theory. We will simply know God's presence. He will be the supreme reality in our lives. When we truly

enter conversation with Jesus and let him show us not just the way to God but God himself, then we can enjoy the promised 'spring of water gushing up to eternal life.'

Remember the Samaritans who heard the testimony from the woman at the well. They believed first of all because of her testimony, but then they came to see Jesus for themselves. They asked him to stay with them and he stayed there two days. Jesus didn't say: 'Oh, I can't stay with you. I'm a Jew and you're Samaritans and you know there are fundamental disagreements between us.' All the barriers and disputes of religion and nationality were laid aside. Jesus hung out with them and probably enjoyed it, just as you get the impression that he enjoyed his encounter with the feisty woman at the well. These Samaritans could then join the woman in her new-found faith. They could say to her: 'It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Savior of the world.' First the woman and then all these other Samaritans who at first were predisposed to be hostile to Jesus were prepared to engage with this extraordinary Jew and to realize that he has opened up for them a thorough awareness of themselves, as they are and as they may be. They know that what God offers them in Jesus goes beyond all their traditional disputes and has to do with the source of life itself. He has breached the barriers between peoples and can help the world recognize its dependence on God the creator. Don't let's insult God by thinking he needs protecting from our scientific knowledge, however much it challenges our preconceptions. And don't let's insult God by insisting that he be made in our image and run the world on our terms. Let's let God be God, who if we will only worship him will quench our deepest thirsts. Let us listen carefully to all that Jesus reveals to us of and about the great 'I am' and love him simply because he is God. He is the God who creates each of us out of love. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.