

**St Mark's, Niagara on the Lake**  
**The Third Sunday in Lent, year 'A'**  
**12 March 2023**  
**The Rev'd Leighton Lee**

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In his magisterial book *God In Search of Man*, Abraham Joshua Heschel says,  
“It is customary to blame secular science and anti-religious philosophy for the eclipse of religion in modern society. It would be more honest to blame religion for its own defeats. Religion declined not because it was refuted, but because it became irrelevant, dull, oppressive, insipid. When faith is completely replaced by creed, worship by discipline, love by habit; when the crisis of today is ignored because of the splendour of the past; when faith becomes an heirloom rather than a living fountain; when religion speaks only in the name of authority rather than with the voice of compassion—its message becomes meaningless.”

People are dancing on the grave of religion these days—at least on the grave of the sort of religion that Heschel describes. They think it's full of meaningless ritual and self-satisfied hypocrites. And let's face it: that critique is not entirely unfair. It's become cliquish. It's lost its confidence and has allowed itself to be cowed by loudmouths on both the right and the left. Why? Maybe it's because it's beset with anxiety since you and I are anxious people.

One of the ways we try to calm our anxieties is to cling to religious practices that are familiar—and maybe even lacking spirit. In our first reading this morning, we're told that the Israelites asked themselves, “Is the Lord among us or not?” That's a question we should be asking ourselves, but we don't because it's safer to cling to a bespoke religion with a “Me and my Jesus” type of piety. That might be fine on a personal level, but on a corporate level it's been a disaster. It's no secret that attendance at church and faith in God are declining every year. Of course there are many reasons why this should be so, and these sorts of sociological phenomena can't be attributed to just one thing. Nevertheless, might it just be possible that one of the biggest reasons why people no longer turn to the Church is that it has become the heirloom of which Heschel speaks rather than an living fountain?

All of which brings me to this morning's gospel. By and large, in the Fourth Gospel it's the outsiders, the apostates, and those who have been rejected who see Jesus for who he is. This is the context of our Lord's encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well. He's in foreign territory and he meets this woman who was just there to get some water. Given the political and religious climate of the time, this should have been an anxious encounter. But it wasn't. Jesus knew that she wasn't simply there because she was thirsty for water. Not really. She was there because she was thirsty for a new way of living, a new way of thinking, a new way of worshipping. And she found these things in her personal encounter with Him.

But don't assume that this story is only about the outsiders who are seeking and are thirsty. Don't assume it doesn't apply to us, because the Samaritan woman is also our avatar. For we're in need of the living water as much as anyone else—maybe more so. Too often we're caught up thinking that if we're pious enough or conventionally religious enough everything will be well. But it won't be, and I think that deep down we have all felt how hollow our claims and our certainties can be.

And the world is thirsting for God as much as we are. But how are people to get this water from a Church which has turned inward, which is consumed with its own ecclesiastical manoeuvres, which looks to all the world like a restricted club?

Unlike the Samaritan woman who went and told everyone she could about this amazing encounter, we don't. We expect they'll come to us. All we need is some better advertising and a lively presence on social media, and everything will be taken care of. And why did the Samaritan woman go out and tell everyone? Was it not because she'd been moved by the One who showed her kindness and acceptance—and a new way of living and believing? And because of this, she discovered a new way of living faithfully in a world so easily drawn up into all sorts of cabals and silos.

Living faithfully is grounded in the abiding trust that God's promises aren't empty. It doesn't rescue us from the anxieties and trials of this—or any—age. What it does do is give us the strength to face them and to embrace a new way of living with gratitude. Even more, it allows us to see the divine in everyone, even—and maybe especially—in those for whom religion is seen as the harbinger of hostility, sectarianism, and intolerance.

In her novel *Sin* Josephine Hart suggests that,

“We are here to add to the sum of human goodness. To prove the thing exists. And however futile each individual act of courage or generosity, self-sacrifice or grace-it still proves the thing exists. Each act adds to the fund. It needs replenishment. Not only because evil flourishes, and is, most indefensibly, defended. But because goodness is no longer a respectable aim in life.”

The world is a hard and stony place—as hard and stony as the human heart. And it's getting harder, crueller, colder. We just heard that “Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans” and such sectarianism is more in evidence than ever before—be it between progressive and conservative, blue and red, prosperous and needy. The issues dividing us have hardened us to the point that only a miracle can save us. Our faith is that miracle—if only we would have the courage to draw deeply from its well of compassion and truth. Our faith is the water that can refresh the world. Our faith will, drop by drop, wear down the stoniness of this world's divisions until we see that the Lord is indeed among us—all of us. The water he will give will become a spring, gushing up to eternal life.