

Exodus 17:1-11; Romans 5:1-11; John 4:5-42

Wesley UC 10.30am

Prayer: Lord God, Creator and Sustainer of all that was, and is and is to come, come to us now and speak to us through your gracious and life giving word. And may my words as spoken and heard convey the good news the Gospel with grace and integrity. Amen.

A few weeks ago I listened to a fascinating conversation on radio ABC Classic FM between Margaret Throsby and Richard Bernstein. Richard is a Disability Rights advocate from America and was in Australia as a guest of Inclusion Melbourne, Victoria's oldest day service for people with an intellectual ability. The interesting thing about Richard is that he has been blind from birth. As a young man he gained significant publicity when he challenged the Law School Admissions Council arguing that the Law School Admissions Test was discriminatory against the blind. He subsequently graduated from the Northwestern University School of Law and since that time has practiced as a Disability Rights advocate. In his spare time he has also completed 18 marathons and 2 Ironman Triathlons.

In the interview, Margaret Throsby tried to get Bernstein to share his thoughts on his experience of living with a disability. But he would not be drawn in. He didn't see his blindness as disabling, but rather it was for him a simple fact of his existence. His focus was on building positive and serving relationships with others, not living out in any way the sense of being a victim of cruel circumstance. Margaret seemed genuinely taken aback by all this and at one point commented "what an amazing man!" Again and again he defined his life in terms of his mission in the world. He talked about the importance of faith as the core dynamic in his life. He didn't go into specific details, Bernstein, but what he shared was sufficient to highlight the clear sense of identity which he had as a faithful human being, within the Jewish tradition.

Today we have heard 3 readings which together invite us to think about our own identity issues – both as participants in a faith community, and as faithful individuals. From Exodus, we are reminded that the children of Israel go to a point of giving up their identity as God's chosen people when confronted with the prospect of death. From the Gospel of John, we have a story about an unnamed Samaritan whose sense of identity as a person of faith was transformed as a result of meeting Jesus. These stories are complementary, and on reflection, I believe they resonate with our own life situations.

First, in the reading from Exodus we find the children of Israel in the wilderness following their remarkable deliverance from slavery in Egypt. Now, they are thirsty – with nothing to celebrate. Their focus is on sheer survival, and they are panicking.

In their despair they vent their anger towards Moses and he responds in desperation: "Why quarrel with me?" and "Why do you test the Lords?"

Moses cries out to God. "What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me?" And God responds by instructing Moses to take the staff with which he parted the Nile, and go to

the rock at Horeb. The staff here was to be seen as a visible link between God's past deliverance of the people from Egypt, and God's ongoing provision for them in the wilderness.

So Moses strikes the rock, and the water flows. But he doesn't appear to give God any thanks or praise for the miracle. He just focuses on the people's complaint, he discloses the core issue for his people, not previously mentioned, "Is the Lord among us or not?"

This is their underlying anxiety – that God had left them desolate, despite their deliverance! So they turn on Moses, and look back nostalgically on their past life in Egypt imagining that maybe it would be better if they had stayed there! In short, their identity as God's chosen people is under attack, and they are in process of reshaping it in their quest for survival, rather than in their faith relationship with God.

As a congregation here, we too have experienced testing times. It's those experiences of crisis when we ask of ourselves "How is God really present with us in all of this?" There is the temptation to look back at the past nostalgically at some golden age in the church, or complain to our leaders, or seek simplistic solutions. But what is much better is to affirm a deeper sense of our identity as God's people. It's when times are tough and tensions grow that genuine spiritual growth is possible as we face them, own them and work through them with good grace.

Paul, in today's reading text from Romans, offers a candid view of how suffering fits within the context of the Christian life. He starts with the theological affirmation "since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ" and then later writes "we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produced endurance, and endurance produced character, and character produced hope.." For Paul, suffering is not a sign of God's absence, but the very environment in which Christians grow!

I come from a Methodist background and was ordained 8 years prior to church union. My memories of the Annual Conference of the NSW Methodist Church are weakening now but I do recall a hymn that was always sung at the opening service of worship. Imagine the Lyceum Theatre in Sydney, full of Methodist ministers and laypeople from around the State, standing and singing, full throttle, the Wesleyan hymn:

And are we yet alive, and see each other's face? Glory and thanks to Jesus give for his mighty grace. [to verse 3]

What troubles have we seen, what mighty conflicts past, Fightings without, and fears within, since we assembled last! [Wesley was obviously a keen observer of congregational life!]

Yet out of all the Lord Hath brought us in his love: And still he doth His help afford, and hides our life above.

Then let us make our boast of his redeeming power, which saves us to the uttermost, till we can sin no more! [all very Pauline!]

Who are we? Whose are we? We are people who share a common identify sourced in Jesus Christ, in every life experience.

In the Gospel reading for today, we hear a story of one nameless woman's transformation as a result of her encounter with Jesus. Many of us would be familiar with the story and have heard, no doubt, highly imaginative and biblically unwarranted portraits of the woman which distort our understanding. Many preachers have assumed that she was a woman of ill repute, shunned by her community for her immoral behaviour and therefore a wonderful testimony to the power of the converting word!

To be sure, Jesus knows she has been married 5 times and now is with a man who is not her husband, but what are the particulars? Deaths? Divorces? Legal tangles? Or promiscuity? We do not know! What we know is Jesus, as is his custom in John, reveals special knowledge of the individuals he encounters and alerts them that in meeting him, they may encounter the transcendent. Notice that Jesus does not urge the woman to repent or change her behaviour. Neither does he offer a word a word of forgiveness.

The reading is Jesus' longest recorded conversation with anyone. On so many accounts its seems extraordinary that it took place at all: a man and a woman in public, a Jew and a Samaritan, a transient and a local, one offering living water and another caught in the ceaseless rounds of drawing water at the well. But in a unique way, God was present.

The conversation begins with Jesus' request for a drink of water. But through the ensuing exchanges the transient Jew offers more than did Jacob, the patriarch with whose name the well was associated. In fact, Jesus' knowledge of the woman convinces her that he is prophet from Jerusalem and this prompts her to defend her own tradition of worship on Mt Gerazim. Surprisingly, Jesus does not debate her, but simply declares that the true worship of God is not defined by place but by God's own nature, which is spirit and truth. In other words, God transcends race, tradition, place and liturgy. So if this traveller from Jerusalem is greater than Jacob, is a prophet and yet more than a prophet, the woman has but one category left. In her mind, "Could the person standing before me be none other than the Messiah?"

And what is Jesus' response? "I am he". The woman then runs away, even leaving her water jar behind! She leaves that jar, the jar in a sense representing her past life – with its tragedies and disappointments, and trades it in for the living water Jesus offers. And when she returns to her city she gives a call to faith: "Come, see a man who told me all that I ever did. Can this be the Christ?"

The unnamed woman is a witness, not a likely witness and certainly not a thorough witness. But such was her profound experience that she would say "Come and see a man who told me all that I ever did "and then, tentatively "He cannot be the Messiah, can he?"

But her witness is enough. It is an invitation and non-judgemental. It matches her experience and is honest with its own uncertainty, it is for everyone who will hear. Rather refreshing don't you think? What she does is to share her experience of Jesus within the range permitted by her own

experience! And she does this in a way that allows her hearers arrive at their own affirmations about Jesus ... and they do! Their conclusion? "This indeed is the Saviour of the world".

We have here a wonderful story of God's grace, conveyed in Jesus. It is seen in his offer of living water flowing through the Samaritan woman's life. She will never be the same again. And her witness as the first evangelist is recorded in Scripture as an inspiration to us all.

I find this story speaking so profoundly to our own human situation.

Let me tell you about a man called Phil. I first met Phil when he was in the Intensive Care Ward of Bowral Hospital. I did not know him at all, but the Unit manager suggested that I pay him a visit. He was a man of about 65 who worked in the printing industry whose career had taken him to various parts around the world. When I met him he was recovering from a massive heart attack and he was waiting to be transferred to a Sydney Hospital for a major heart surgery. I recall him talking very frankly with me – this was a critical moment for him, and among other things, he experienced a near death experience. So we talked about life and death, about God and faith and the church and at the end, just before I left, he said "Ian, if I come through all of this you'll see me again..."

What I didn't know then was the fact that his brush with death became for him an encounter with God's grace, and he believed that Christ was present with him summoning him to live with renewed faith and service for the rest of his life."

Sure enough, when he returned from Sydney and was mobile again he came to the Mittagong Church. After the service, he said, "It was all good, but where are the children, and young families? You have a few acres here around the church, what are you going to do with them? In his own upfront way, Phil became a conscience for mission for that congregation. He was like a conduit for Christ's living water flowing through the life of those people. Phil lived for 10 more years and during that time he helped initiate an innovative community project which provided low cost housing on one side of the historic church [Wesley Court!]. On the other side he helped develop a landscaped area for a monthly community and witness to God's love and care for a wide cross section of people. Through all of this Phil continued to grow in faith, and hope and love.

It is time to move on, and we do so with a clear sense of our dependence on God. Let us live out our communal identity as God's people with a renewed sense of mission in every circumstance, and let us live out our personal identity as Christians who express faith with integrity and are receptive to the Jesus' life giving water which never runs dry.

And now to God be all praise and majesty power and dominion, for ever and ever.

Amen.