

The comedian Joan Rivers once said: “I hate housework. You make the beds, you wash the dishes, and six months later you have to start all over again.” Now, whether or not you spend more of your time on housework than she did, the sentiment is one we’ve probably all experienced at some time or another.

So imagine if someone told you that they could offer you something which would mean you would never have to clean again. Imagine how you might alternate between doubt – asking “how can that work?” – and delight – “yes, give me this amazing thing!” It’s easy to see why the Samaritan woman would mistake what Jesus was offering her. In a world where getting water is both essential and deeply labour-intensive – as it was then, and is still for so many in our world – who wouldn’t be inclined to take at face value the offer of a water which means you will never thirst again?

Jesus doesn’t disdain this kind of physical need. He has sat down by the well because his body is tired from the journey. He is thirsty; he asks for a drink. But Jesus knows that this woman has deeper needs, too; needs she’s not fully recognised or understood.

When she leaps at his offer for a drink, he turns her attention to one of these other needs in asking her to bring along her husband. Of course, he already knows that she currently has no husband; that she has had five husbands in the past, and that she is living with a man who is not her husband. We needn’t conclude from this, as many have done, that her past is one of throwing up one man for another, or that she is at present engaged in adultery. These things may well be true, but it is also possible that her past husbands simply died and that she now lives with a family member for protection. What should be clear, either way, is that her past is full of pain and disappointment. Many desires could have motivated her to enter into these marriages. She may have been seeking

intimacy, children, societal approval, or simply comfort and security. And she may or may not have found what she hoped for in these relationships. But when the relationships ended, for whatever reason they ended, she must have inevitably lost some or all of what she had desired.

Jesus shows the woman that he knows what she has done, and what she has been through. This intimate knowledge opens up her understanding; he has tapped into a thirst that goes beyond that which brought her to the well. She is also beginning to reach for a greater understanding of this man before her. Having started by calling him “a Jew”, his first offer has made her wonder if he can be greater than Jacob; now his knowledge of her makes her see him as a prophet.

However, there are still other desires that get in the way of a full recognition of who Jesus is. Our pride, our desire to be right, our yearning for superiority can all prevent us from recognising the face of God in those whom we meet. For the Samaritans and the Jews, as for humans throughout so much of history, these desires played out in religious conflict. As so often, they could tell themselves that the barriers between them were based on core matters of faith. Where and how should we worship God? No one could deny the importance of this question.

But Jesus breaks down all the barriers we create for ourselves. God seeks all those who will worship him in spirit and in truth. In our faith as in all things, when we find ourselves divided, we must examine our own motivations, seek reconciliation when we can, and always be ready to question whether in our disagreements we are setting up artificial obstacles to encountering God either in our own hearts or in the hearts of those we meet.

For through all of this encounter, Jesus has been drawing the woman towards a recognition of her deepest desire, a recognition which will in turn enable her to a greater recognition of him as the Saviour she is truly seeking, empowering her to share this recognition with others. As he has spoken with her, Jesus has catalogued her desires at every level – those of the body, those of the heart, and those of the mind. For created beings, there is nothing inherently sinful in any of these desires as such. But each of these desires has in common with the others that they can be misdirected, and prevent us from recognising the most basic desire of them all: the desire and need for God.

The Samaritan woman needed Jesus to help her set her other desires in perspective before she could recognise what he truly meant by living water. So why did he begin with his offer before she could understand it? Perhaps because we can all understand that thirst is a truly basic desire; we need water to live, and there is no time in our lives when we can do without it. And so in using this image of water Jesus is reminding both the Samaritan woman and us that our need for God is just as basic, fundamental and constant as our physical thirst.

We are created *by God for God*, and destined to be united *with God*. If we lead lives which separate us from God, we languish and suffer just as surely as if we go too long without water. But we are often all too slow to recognise or understand what's going on when this happens. And this has everything to do with the distractions of our other desires.

As Christians, we are called at all times to self-examination, to recognise those things which distract us from God and God's plans for us, and to seek God's support and guidance in reordering our desires. But the shared discipline of Lent is a particular time of opportunity.

We live in a world and society where many people cannot meet their basic physical needs, in which climate change, inequality and conflict deprive people of what they need merely to live. For those among us who have more than is truly essential, choosing to give more to charity or to spend time helping the needy and the sick during Lent is an opportunity to put our own physical desires in their proper perspective, as well as to relieve the unjust burdens of unmet needs in others.

We live in a society and an economy which encourages us to find comfort for our hearts in commodities, in appearances, in damaging or superficial forms of relationship. Lent invites us to ask what truly matters to us, what it is that we are looking for. In giving up things which are unhealthy, taking on healthy habits, or trying to be kinder and more loving to those in our lives, we have an opportunity to form relationships with others and ourselves that are more sustaining and enriching, ones which leave room for us to encounter God both in our hearts and in one another.

We belong to a society and to a Church in which we often find ourselves frequently in conflict and disagreement, quick to vilify those with whom we disagree, and slow to recognise our own pride and misguided motivations. Lent gives us the opportunity to take up or return to spiritual disciplines which encourage habits of mind which make us more open to God and to one another, readings in our worship which challenge us, and the framework of humility we need to recognise and nourish our deepest desire of all, our desire to know and to love God as we are known and loved by God.

In Lent we have an opportunity to rid ourselves of those things which do not truly satisfy us, to tend to those habits and relationships which bring us real health, and to feed ourselves and one another

in our journey with and to the God who will satisfy us more abundantly than we could ever expect or imagine.

Let us pray:

You have made us for yourself, oh Lord,

and our hearts are restless until they find rest in you.

Guide us with your Spirit, so that our desires may always be informed by love of you,

and bring us at the last to rest in you, in whom all our thirst is quenched.

Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.