

# Give us water that we may drink

Helen Griffiss

Two years ago I wrote:

*'I spent the first month of this year with the desert people of north-west India. In villages where there had been a water-harvesting programme in operation for a few seasons, I saw signs of hope – the villagers were confident that they could continue to feed themselves and their animals, providing there are good monsoon rains in July. In other remote areas where there is little or no water technology, I saw worn-out despondent people, always greeting us with the same heart-rending plea: 'Give us water' as if we could magic it in an instant. The contrast was stark; the people who had enough water were lively, and eager to work; those without sufficient water were only partly living – their expressions, their movements were altogether different.'*<sup>1</sup>

The villagers in the desert who were working alongside NGOs on water-harvesting and irrigation programmes had been raised out of their meagre existence into a way of life which was full of promise. Their collective consciousness had been alerted to long-term planning, and hope for the future. They were able to perceive their own needs for developing the community: training in primary health care, education for both boys and girls, capitalise on their indigenous husbandry skills, plant trees, harvest more crops to feed themselves and their animals, market their produce locally to avoid the dysfunctional effect of the menfolk migrating to towns and cities every year in search of work. I felt that I was witnessing the resurrection life more profoundly than ever before, with its free-flowing, energising spirit, its tributaries of richly diverse opportunities springing from the primary source: water.

One of my abiding images of the gift of water to the desert people, is of a woman I met at a well on the outskirts of a village in the saline

desert region. She looked very old, though I doubt if she was any older than me; her skin was wrinkled and her teeth badly stained from fluoride poisoning; she was very thin – a result of a lifetime of malnutrition. But her face was *alive* with a broad smile which totally captivated me! She was revelling in the sheer joy of being able to wash her clothes at a well, an ordinary, daily activity which had previously been denied her, because of her lack of status at the very bottom of a caste-ridden society, in which she is a 'non-person'. Now this new well was used by all the people of the village.<sup>2</sup> The next phase of development, almost completed when I visited, was the laying of a water-pipe from the well to a stand-pump in the village, to save the women having to carry water from the distant well several times a day. Women in the poorest communities throughout the world suffer spinal injuries through constantly carrying heavy water jars on their heads for long distances.

### **Sitting at the well**

I sat at the well with this woman, and I remembered the encounter between Jesus and the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well – arguably one of the most challenging stories in the whole of the New Testament.<sup>3</sup> This was a meeting which transcended all the barriers of race, culture, religion and gender. Jesus was on his way back from Judaea to Galilee, travelling through the desert region of Samaria – hostile territory for all Jews. Jesus comes to the outskirts of the city of Sychar and sends his disciples on ahead to buy food, while he rests at the well. This is unusual, because wells and men rarely go together – in the month I spent in the Indian desert, I never once saw a man collecting water. Not surprisingly, a Samaritan woman comes along carrying a water jar – this is her territory. She would never have initiated a conversation; she would be silently going about her work. Jesus says: 'Give me a drink' and with those few words, he's broken every code of conduct in the Jewish law! Surely the woman cannot believe what she is hearing, but she is quick enough to pick up on every implication of this request: 'How is it that you, a *Jew*, asks for a *drink* of me, a *woman* of *Samaria*?' Never, never would a Jewish man ask a favour of a woman of a different race and religion, least of all a Samaritan woman; in the eyes of the Jewish world this makes him



irredeemably unclean. What is more, Jesus shares a drink of water from the same vessel as the woman – Jews and Samaritans never ate or drank anything from the same vessel. His thirst quenched, Jesus then launches into a theological discussion with the woman, and she is able to engage, to question. Why is this so? Perhaps because Jesus affirms the woman: he has already recognised her full humanity, her value in society, and now he recognises her understanding of God, which seems to surpass the understanding of his disciples. In an open and honest exchange, all the barriers and differences are overcome, and they banter back and forth about the ‘living water’ – the gift of God which Jesus gives, which becomes a gushing spring to eternal life. The creative tension between them is almost tangible, you feel that something good – *really good* – will come out of this encounter with the living Lord. And it does! The woman’s life has been turned upside down – her priorities are different now. She gives her testimony in the city, which converts many Samaritans to believe that Jesus is truly the saviour of the world. John adds a touch of irony at the end: the men of the city marginalise her once more by saying that it was not her testimony which converted them, but because they had seen and heard for themselves!

As I mingled with women at many wells in India, women with clean water to drink, women with clean water to wash their children, wash their clothes, bathe wounds, this precious gift from God became a reality for me. During my diaconal year of ordained ministry, it has been my privilege and joy to baptise infants. The liturgical symbolism of water in the Christian initiation rite has awakened my appreciation of the need for an holistic doctrine of salvation which re-integrates and re-connects us with the rest of humankind and the whole of God’s creation. Cyril of Jerusalem compared the newly baptised to a young olive tree planted and watered by God: ‘*Water was the beginning of the world, and Jordan the beginning of the good news.*’ The fruit, he said, is the responsibility of the new Christian.<sup>4</sup> The sins of which we repent when we renew our baptism vows might include what we have done to the world’s forests, rivers and marine creatures. Rachel Carson reminds us that defiled water is not a worthy symbol of salvation:

*'Of all our natural resources, water has become the most precious... In an age when man (sic) has forgotten his origins and is blind even to his most essential needs for survival, water along with other resources has become the victim of his indifference.'*<sup>5</sup>

In the sacrament of baptism, we might set our hearts towards regenerating and purifying our beaches, seas and rivers, and praying for those who work to bring the gift of clean water to all God's people. We might baptize with living water at, or from a local river or well, and return the sacramental water to the soil; plant a baptismal tree which the baptised person knows, waters and nurtures over a life-time.<sup>6</sup>

## **Water transforms**

Water transforms lives. It is a gift from God to be harvested, conserved and kept pure from our own selfish and arrogant pollution; it is to be used to cleanse and revive our bodies, and irrigate the land for our cattle and crops. From the gift of water flows improved health care, education, a way of life which is altogether more wholesome. Jesus used this powerful image to teach people about God's healing of relationships, God's healing of nations, God's salvation of the world. Some people grasped the truth, like the woman of Samaria; some failed to recognise the truth, or ignored it and carried on as before... others, the majority, wilfully contradicted, criticised, condemned and finally crucified the truth. Our lives, and the lives of countless others throughout the world, can be transformed by springs of clean, pure, water – this water is the spirit of truth and life.

## **Notes**

- 1 Extract from my article in *Bransgore Parish Journal* (April 1999), quoted in Helen Griffiss, *Reflections at the Well* (June 1999) on my return from an ordination placement in the Indian desert with Dr Nicholas and Professor Mary Grey, co-founders of *Wells for India* (see note 2).
- 2 This well, and other wells, are funded by the NGO *Wells for India* which works alongside Indian NGOs and local people to bring



water irrigation and harvesting programmes to drought-stricken rural areas of Rajasthan.

3 John 4.1-42

4 Cyril of Jerusalem, Lecture III,5, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, P Schall & H Wace, trans., Vol VII, T & T Clark, Edinburgh, 1989, p.73, quoted in Edward P Echlin, *The Deacon and Creation*, The Church Union, 1992, p.12

5 Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring*, Penguin, London, 1964, p.50

6 Suggestions for use at baptism by Edward P Echlin, *The Deacon and Creation*, Church Union, 1992, p.12-13

### **About the author**

*Helen Griffiss is currently USPG Mission Adviser in the dioceses of Salisbury, Exeter and Truro. Born and educated in Wales, she has a MA in Spirituality from King Alfred's College, Winchester, is particularly interested in the spiritualities of marginalised peoples worldwide and has worked alongside people of different faiths in North and South India. She was ordained to the Anglican ministry in 2000 and is a non-stipendiary curate in the village of Bransgore, in the New Forest, England.*