

Of Rivers Vibrating Underground

Set Pools of Silence

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Readings*John 4: 5-26*

So he came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon.

A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, 'Give me a drink'. (His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.) The Samaritan woman said to him, 'How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?' (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.) Jesus answered her, 'If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, "Give me a drink", you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water.' The woman said to him, 'Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?' Jesus said to her, 'Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.' The woman said to him, 'Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water.'

Jesus said to her, 'Go, call your husband, and come back.' The woman answered him, 'I have no husband.' Jesus said to her, 'You are right in saying, "I have no husband"; for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!' The woman said to him, 'Sir, I see that you are a prophet. Our ancestors worshipped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem.' Jesus said to her, 'Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.' The woman said to him, 'I know that Messiah is coming' (who is called Christ). 'When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us.' Jesus said to her, 'I am he, the one who is speaking to you.'

There Are Stones That Sing¹

'Oh, gleaming generosity, how can they write you out?' – Mary Oliver

The churches are almost empty or sold,
as if they've reached their tipping point,
and from the pulpits, god slid out.

And all that fanciful gold leaf
on heaven's floor was incinerated
by our telescopes, whose lenses caught
it in their scope. And bits of tattered
god fell down.

I've heard that *âme* ('soul' in French)
is the name of a wooden chip,
very exposed and vulnerable,
that violin makers insert into
the bodies of their instruments
to further enhance the sound.
So maybe that's where god
lives now.

If you ask a priest, he'll point up.
If you ask black fellas, they'll point down
to stones that sing and rivers
vibrating underground.

Lisa Jacobson

Dear friends – welcome back! I've been very much looking forward to gathering with you tonight. 'Behold how good and lovely it is when families live together in unity' says Psalm 133, and these words popped into my mind as I began preparing this reflection – 'behold how good and lovely it is when there is a family, a community to belong to – a community whose life and commitments we share. It's good to be with you again.

¹ Published in *south in the world* (Crawley: UWA Publishing, 2014).

This first service back in February always feels like an opportunity to set our faces collectively towards the new year and to remind ourselves of our essential calling. I've also been pondering a few themes over January that I wanted to share with you. Australian poet Lisa Jacobson's wonderful poem, 'There Are Stones That Sing',² seems to speak to all of this – so in this reflection I want to have a go at weaving all these threads together!

What does it mean to practice Christian faith and to be church, in our time and place? That's one of the questions I've been holding. As Jacobson points out: 'The churches are almost empty or sold, as if they've reached their tipping point, and from the pulpits, god slid out'. That's not universally true, of course. There remain pockets of what look like ecclesial 'success', vitality – but we know that for many people, for our culture at large, the church is no more than a fading relic of a by-gone age, 'all that fanciful gold leaf on heaven's floor incinerated by our telescopes' as 'bits of tattered god' fall down. We live, writes philosopher Charles Taylor in 'a secular age', and our society has undergone a shift from a time in which 'it was virtually impossible not to believe in God', to one where for many 'faith never even seems an eligible possibility'. In this context, as he says, 'even ... the staunchest believer' may find it difficult 'to sustain [their] faith'.³ I feel that for myself at times – I'm sure you have your moments too. So, what are we doing here? What's the point of us?

Particularly, and this brings me to the second theme I've been pondering, how do we justify the time and energy committed to being *here* when the world's needs are so urgent? Sometimes I think of the amount of time I spend preparing the weekly reflection and I wonder – is this the best use of my energy? Is this what *life* asks of me? It seems a painful irony, for example, that tonight's readings and songs are all so joyfully water based – we've sung of the 'river of God' that sets our feet a-dancin', heard the promise of living water that never runs dry, spoken of pools of silence and

² Lisa Jacobson, 'There Are Stones That Sing', *south in the world* (Crawley: UWA Publishing, 2014), p.89.

³ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), p.3.

refreshing – all while the rivers of our land are filled with dead and dying fish, whole systems drying out, water apparently corruptly bought and sold, the land and its peoples despairing. Of what use is waxing lyrical over this metaphorical ‘river of God’ to the Murray-Darling basin and the Menindee Lakes? Is our music, our liturgy, our prayer just one more layer of ‘fanciful gold leaf’, a pitiful attempt to gild reality and ultimately futile?

Well, maybe. And yet, and this brings me to the third theme of my January, there remains in me the stubborn faith (maybe it’s more than faith, maybe it’s a knowing?) – that despite everything, there is something we’re called to remain true to, something we’re asked to make visible, and that this something really is critical for the life of the world. Jacobson writes: ‘I’ve heard that *âme* (‘soul’ in French) is the name of a wooden chip, very exposed and vulnerable, that violin makers insert into the bodies of their instruments to further enhance the sound. So maybe that’s where god lives now’. Actually, I would say, that’s where God has always lived. Exposed and vulnerable to what we make of God – always on the brink of being pushed out of our busy lives, or falsified by self-serving religion. God able to be encountered only as we ourselves enter that same state of exposure and vulnerability, that tender, undefended, in-between space of listening, longing, resonating in response – like the *âme*, the soul, in the violin. That’s where God lives. And I believe that above all else the vocation of our community is to know this state, to live from it, and so open it as a place of encounter for others.

We see how this works in Jesus’ meeting with the Samaritan woman. He’s intrigued her with a story about water springing up from within, the possibility of a qualitatively different kind of sustenance for life than she can draw for herself. And, though she’s still a little confused about exactly what it means, she wants what’s on offer. ‘Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw’. Yet the condition of her receiving, it turns out, is her preparedness to be vulnerable, to expose the tender truth of her life. She asks for water and Jesus says: ‘Go call your husband, and come back’. It’s quite a non-sequitur. Yet she

doesn't blink and there's no hint of dissembling. 'I have no husband'. Then we hear the back-story. And with this painful, undefended honesty, she shows herself capable of receiving the gift he can give – which is connection to the divine spirit, the realising of God's life in hers. She becomes moreover someone who can bear news of this possibility, this life, to others. John concludes the story by saying that 'many believed in Jesus because of the woman's testimony' and that through her many others came to know it first-hand: 'it is no longer because of what you said that we believe', the townsfolk tell her, 'for [now] we have heard for ourselves and we know that this is truly the Saviour of the world'.

So what exactly does this metaphor of 'living water' signify? How does it matter? It's to do, I think, with being connected to the deep source, the well-spring, of life itself. It's the possibility of being tapped into a reality that isn't just self-generated or self-contained. And it matters because the more this connection happens, the less we need focus on defending or asserting our private, separate selves. We know ourselves part of the whole, belonging to a larger life. This frees us up from self-concern, makes us available for what life wants from us. Before you tell your life what you intend to do with it, Parker Palmer writes, listen for what life wants to do with you. That's part of it. This felt sense of connection, this openness to life's flow, helps us trust in the ultimate goodness of things even when they're hard or overwhelming, or when despair threatens. For the more fully we give ourselves to this connection and let ourselves be sourced in it, the more we experience its essential nature as love; and the more love just pours out of us. How do we gain access?

Entering this flow of divine love, becoming connected at this level, isn't something you gain, Jesus says, simply by participating in religious forms, worshipping God on the mountain of Samaria nor in the temple in Jerusalem. The churches too, remember, have reached their 'tipping point'. Maybe once we had the illusion God was contained inside our structures, legitimating the status quo and happy to be painted gold. But 'The hour is coming, and is now here', Jesus says,

‘when the true worshippers will worship God in spirit and truth’. Spirit and truth. The exposed and vulnerable space of authentic encounter. This is why we gather. It’s the point of us.

I know we’re at different places with this. Some of you might have a live sense of what I just spoke about – of connectedness to the current, an awareness (probably not continuous!) of a qualitatively different energy indwelling you, of love enabling and flowing through you; others might feel on the outside of this, somehow missing out, yearning but still parched, disconnected. Most of us, I guess, will have experiences of both. But however it is for you at the moment, I believe this *is* the possibility for life we’re called to know for ourselves, and open as a possibility for others. This is what our worship, our meditation and prayer is about; it’s what our gatherings at L’Chaim and Men’s Circle, Spiritual Practice and Theology Reading Group seek to enable.

The needs of our world are indeed urgent – the cry of the earth is clamorous. But our responses need to be sourced in the well-spring of divine love, the river of God that sustains and waters all life. Otherwise, as Thomas Merton said, even in our desire to do good we communicate only the contagion of our own obsessions, ambitions and anxieties.

‘If you ask a priest’ where God is, Jacobson says, ‘he’ll point up’. ‘If you ask black fellas, they’ll point down to stones that sing and rivers vibrating underground’. Jesus too recognised the current of God flowing beneath and through all that is, vibrating with life, singing love. As we regather in community, we commit ourselves anew to listening, longing, and resonating in response, that we too may become conduits of this living water, drink for a thirsting world.