

# Third Sunday of Lent

A personal encounter

## Be Opened ... to the Living Water



Toni Janke

Hello, my name is Toni Janke. I identify as a Wuthathi and Meriam woman of both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander heritage. My people originally come from Cape York and Murray Island in the Torres Strait.

I identify strongly with the Samaritan woman from the well and her encounter with Christ as living water.

Indigenous people have a strong connection to the land and sea. When I think of water, I think of the sea in the Torres Strait and surrounding the northern tip of Cape York Peninsula – the water, the pristine sand dunes, these are sacred places, the home of my ancestors for thousands of years. Water sustained us and was an important source of life in many ways – for fishing and swimming, for the birds and the sea animals such as turtle, dugong and other wildlife. It was a source of industry for the pearling trade and for survival. People travelled from the islands to the mainland for many generations.

I grew up in Cairns in north Queensland and as a child attended Catholic schools. Something inside me was stirred at a young age. I remember making my first Holy Communion and Confirmation and feeling the presence of God as a powerful, life-giving source, although I did not know or fully understand it at the time. Over the course of my life, through many ups and downs, I have come to know Jesus personally as living water that sustains and nourishes me when I feel tired or withered.

Much like the woman at the well, I still don't know who Jesus is fully, and I probably never will. But I do know through my own faith journey, that the more I am open to the living water that Jesus offers me, the more I am transformed and changed. Like the Samaritan woman, I too want to share this experience with others in my community so that they may be transformed and changed as well.

The scripture draws me to reflect on the dynamics of gender, culture, identity and community and how my faith and spirituality has been shaped by my personal encounter with Christ.

As a child, I remember going to Mass, praying the Hail Mary and Our Father. I felt a beautiful sense of love and peace at church on Sundays, often whilst singing hymns and playing the guitar. It has been during these times when I have also felt the pouring out of living water, abundant, grateful, and blessed. Certainly growing up in North Queensland with the mountains, the rivers

and the sea, I have also felt the closeness of God in my surrounding environment. I have felt the nearness of the Spirit and my own ancestors watching over me as I lay on grass in the backyard looking up at the sky, the clouds, talking to God trying to make sense of life and yet, feeling overwhelmed with joy and an inner happiness.

It is this connection to Christ as living water that quenches my thirst at a profound and deeply spiritual level. It is this same living water that has washed over me in times of darkness and struggle, through life's gravest challenges and times when I have essentially wanted to give up hope; when I felt lost and afraid, alone and scared – the many times that I failed, when things didn't work out the way that I had expected and I couldn't find the strength to carry on; the wind had been knocked out of my sails.

Like many others, I have had my share of personal challenges throughout my life – in my career, in my relationships, with health, family, financial issues. I have also had many challenges just to survive from day-to-day in a busy world with different cultural values and experiences than those around me.

Growing up black in the 1970s and 80s in this country hasn't been easy – the racism that I have encountered and that many of us still encounter on a daily basis can be frustrating and debilitating. I have often felt isolated and defeated at various stages in my life. And yet, Jesus has always been there as living water, washing over me, cleansing my heart and my tears, giving me the assurance and comfort that I needed – especially in times when I have wanted to completely give up all hope. It is through this living water that I am alive today and that I am able to renew my faith and trust in God on an ongoing daily basis.

Today it is about being living water for others that sustains and nourishes me. It is about working with others and being the best person I can be and offering up each day in service to God.

I certainly don't do this perfectly, and like the Samaritan woman, I am by no means pure. In fact, I am, despite all of my past mistakes, failings and inadequacies, I am continually blessed and opened up by this living water of Christ every day. I don't want to die on the vine. I want to live and thrive in the fullness of this living water that Jesus freely offers me and every one of us, if we truly want it – irrespective of who we are and where we come from.