

If only ...

Where I grew up in the country we had a reliable rainfall and lots of underground water. Unfortunately, this underground water was very hard. If you sprinkled the plants with it, unless they were very tough, they would die.

One year we planted an “English” lawn in the back yard. We were delighted to see it grow quickly, thanks to unusual gentle summer rain. When the rains had gone, though, the lawn started to dry out and we decided to turn on the sprinkler that sprayed underground water. To our great disappointment, the “English” grass died under the bore water sprinkler.

After that, we switched to buffalo grass, which seemed to survive even with the hardest water. If only we’d done that from the start!

We could probably all tell a story starting with the words “If only”. If only we had known. If only we had listened. If only we had done this or that, we would not be in this difficulty now.

The Israelites in today’s first reading put their “if only” to Moses. “If only we had stayed in Egypt, we wouldn’t be dying of thirst out here in this desert!” The woman who came to draw water at the well in today’s gospel would have had some “if only” stories as she looked back on her life. After all, the few lines we read about her suggest that she had suffered her share of troubles.

“If only” stories have some common elements. There is often some kind of challenging situation. In response to the challenge, a person might make a hasty decision – one that they regret afterwards. Or, they might feel uncertain and not make a decision at all and then later regret their indecision. We can all feel a sense of regret when we realise we have made a wrong choice or we have missed an opportunity. “If only ...”

The woman at the well faced a challenge from Jesus. He invited her to put her faith in him. She might have rejected the invitation or she might have been non-committal, but in fact she accepted the invitation in a most decisive way. She accepted Jesus’ assurance that he could give her “living water”, a different kind of water that would refresh her spirit.

Isn’t it interesting that towards the end of the story, the woman leaves her water jar at the well. She had come originally to draw water from the well. But now she finds she has something more important to do than drawing ordinary water. She hurries back to town to tell others about this extraordinary man she has met.

Many years before, the Israelites had found life-giving water in their desert wandering. Now, in Jesus, this troubled woman has found life-giving water to refresh her on her journey.

We are moving along through Lent. It is a quiet time when we are invited to the well. We can come, like the Israelites, with our grumbling; we can come, like the woman, with our questions; but, however we come, it would be good if we could listen to the challenge we receive from Jesus. He invites us to put our faith in him. He offers us the life-giving water of the Spirit. If we accept his invitation, we too might be able to leave our personal “water jar” behind and enjoy life a whole lot more. We might even say: If only I’d done this years ago!