

## ***Karen's homily for 8<sup>th</sup> March 2026: 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Lent***

It was a journey we made very often, from before I was old enough to remember, until I was 18 and left home for university.

From the family home on the northern edge of the county of Wiltshire, south through Devizes, Westbury, Warminster, Shaftesbury, Blandford (now into Dorset), Puddletown, to my grandparents' home near Weymouth. A journey of some seventy miles, which we undertook three or four times a year, depending on family celebrations and the like. And always by the same route, along windy country lanes and through picturesque thatched villages, because Dad said that was the shortest route so that was the way we went.

Details of that journey seem to be etched indelibly onto my memory. The great high walls at Devizes; the villages of the Deverills and the Winterbournes; the left hand bend with a track off to the right with a little white sign with black writing saying Hart Hill Farm; the white horse carved into the chalk hills above Westbury; places where the trees had grown over the road and become so entangled in each other it was like going through a tunnel; the wonky crossroads signposted straight on to Roade where I went once on a school trip but we always turned left. I could go on....

When I left home to go to university in Cardiff I was amazed and delighted to discover that there was a direct train service from Cardiff to Weymouth, which stopped at stations with names to conjure with, like Castle Cary, and Maiden Newton (my favourite station on that route).

And then I left university and started work and in due course I bought a car. And one day I decided to re-travel that journey of my childhood, to revisit those memories. They were still so fresh in my mind (bearing in mind this was in the days before satnavs had been invented) what could possibly go wrong?

So I set off. And nothing did go wrong; I recognised all the places I had remembered, made the right turnings at the junctions, retraced our old

route. Until, and I have no idea where it was, but somebody had built a bypass, and from that point I was completely lost, looking for signposts to places I thought were in the right direction.

I did get to my grandparents' house, eventually, although it was a tiny bit fraught at times.

My reason for sharing this recollection is this. The idea was a good one. There was nothing wrong with my memories of the route, it was still vividly in my head. But what had changed were the circumstances of the route. What I had learned and remembered had been negated by changes outside of my control and of which I was unaware until I encountered them.

And so it was for the Israelites wandering in the desert. They had been living not necessarily happily in Egypt for many years, had become accustomed to a way of life, a way of thinking about life. Then God, through Moses, called them out of Egypt to spend a while following him in the form of a pillar of cloud by day and fire by night. And as they wandered, followed, God taught them slowly and painfully, a new way of living, a new way of thinking about life. A way that would set them apart from the nations around them, to live as God's people. They had to put behind them the old ways, and that was very difficult.

As today's reading from Exodus reminds us, God brought them to a place called Horeb, where they could rest from the latest part of their travel. A place of rocky mountainous desert. A place of no water.

Steeped in their old way of thinking, the Israelites assume they have to provide for themselves, but there is no water here, so they cry out against Moses and against God, Why have you brought us out here to die? And so God performs a miracle by instructing Moses to strike the rock with his staff and water pours out, enough for all of them and their flocks and herds. But wouldn't it have been better if they had prayed to God, Please help us? Not that I'm judging them at all, it's just an indication of the journey they needed to travel, both physically and to change their hearts and minds, to be ready for their new life as God's people.

And so we come to Jesus at a well in Samaria, asking a Samaritan woman to draw some water for him to drink. You can tell from her response how radical this is! Jews don't talk to Samaritans, let alone ask them for anything; and a woman no less. More than that, a woman with her eighth husband! Not a person a good rabbi of those days would get involved with at all, the disciples' reaction is clear if unspoken. And yet Jesus, once more acting counter-culturally, speaks to her, asks her for help; and she, and her townsfolk believe in him. Things have changed in this moment, and they respond.

We have been thinking about Lent as a journey home; a return to God, in whom we live and move and have our being. One thing we might take from all this – a revisited journey, a desert place and a Samaritan well – is perhaps that it is easier for a traveller to adapt to new circumstances than it is for someone who is certain in their identity.

Maybe at this point in our Lenten journey this is time to just check and see if there is anything about our lives that we are clinging on to, like This is how I am...., that we might loosen our grip even just a little bit and let God in. Who knows what waters of refreshment he might bring.