

## **Lent 3 Year A**

### **John 4 – Jesus and the Samaritan Woman**

Those of us who are English will be familiar with the following experience. You are standing in a bus queue, or waiting at a bar to buy a drink, or minding your own business in church, or sitting in a theatre before curtain up, or anything similarly harmless. And you are aware of someone else, someone you don't know, someone whose demeanour is less reserved than yours, someone who seems rather less taciturn than you. Your heart begins slowly to sink, for you realise in your beautifully English way that you cannot escape. Whether you like it or not, this other person is about to do something very un-English. He is about to commit the ultimate crime against Englishness. He is going to engage you, a stranger, in conversation.

Horror of horrors. Imagine the even worse situation whereby the talkative non familiar is actually a little odd looking. Perhaps he's dressed in a funny way, perhaps he's reading something surprising, perhaps he's talking loudly to no-one in particular. Whatever it is, you

want no part of it. You just want to catch your bus, buy your drink, enjoy your play. Socialisation is not on your agenda.

In our gospel reading, the Samaritan woman endures something similar. All she wants to do, poor thing, is draw water from a well. But there is only one well, and that has a strange looking Galilean beside it. So she has no choice but to hope he will do the decent thing and leave her alone. But no. He asks for a drink. That seems harmless enough but then, this harmless person turns out to be the worst kind of conversational stranger: he turns out to be religious, and no sooner has he asked for a drink than he has gone off on a bizarre rant about water that is alive and the true gift of God. Like any true religious nutcase, he goes on to claim that he is the Messiah. Not the sort of person with whom we want to hold a conversation.

The evangelist sets up this encounter by having Jesus travel from Judea to Galilee passing through Samaria, something geography does not require him to do. The Samaritans were theological hostiles for the Jews. Samaria had been the capital of the northern Kingdom of Israel – as opposed to the much larger Judah, with its temple in Jerusalem. The Assyrians had overthrown Samaria in the 8<sup>th</sup> century BC, and many had

fled further south. When, almost two hundred years later, those from Judah returned from exile having been conquered themselves - this time by the Babylonians – they rejected those they saw as the ethnically and religiously compromised Samaritans, and left them to offer their own sacrifices on their own holy mountain – Mount Gerizim. By the time of Jesus they were a people apart, regarding Jews with the same contempt with which they were looked upon.

So the Samaritan woman encounters not just a stranger, but an enemy. And the enemy engages her in conversation. There is much to discuss. This woman has had five husbands, and now lives with a man to whom she is not married. It is not she but Jesus who volunteers this information, and she diverts attention from her marital state by contrasting Jewish and Samaritan assumptions concerning the proper place of worship, Jerusalem, or the Samaritan temple on Mount Gerizim. For this reason, you may recall, we in this church often refer to her as the very first Anglo-Catholic. Why? Because as soon as Jesus raises awkward moral issues she instantly starts talking about liturgy.

The conversation is long. First of all, the woman is as hostile to Jesus as we'd expect. He asks for a drink and she dismisses him – Jews don't share things with Samaritans. She might also have pointed out that Jewish men wouldn't be expected to converse in public with women. She is an outcast to Jesus in at least two different senses. Jesus responds to her annoyance by revealing something of what is really going on. Had she known who was asking, she would have received more than the nourishment of water from this well. He, the Jewish stranger, offers her living water. Here we have an example of the fourth gospel's love of double meanings. Living water is running, flowing water, a well springing up not sitting static; but it is also the water of life, that which gives and sustains true life, life in the Son of God, the gift proclaimed to all in the Fourth Gospel. Not knowing who the stranger is, and not understanding what he means, she interprets him with the dull literalism of the fundamentalist. He has no bucket, so he cannot draw. Jesus goes further: this living water is different from the water in this well. Still she misunderstands – give me this living water so that I won't be thirsty and will not need to come and draw from the well again.

It is then that Jesus raises the subject of marriage. Her situation is fraught with personal history and scandal. Recognising him to be a prophet, the woman turns straight to the theological divide between

Jews and Samaritans. You may be a prophet, but you are not one of us, she seems to be saying. But Jesus undermines this attempt at separatism. Where she sets up the opposition between Jew and Samaritan, between Mount Zion and Mount Gerizim, Jesus calls her away from the local, the physical, the particular, and leads her towards the truth of worship: God is spirit, and those who worship must worship in Spirit and in truth. God is not to be contained in places, or owned by tribes or peoples. Rather, the truth of God is that he draws us away from these things to find our true selves not in ethnic identity or geographical location, not in family ties or sexual partners, but in the fullness of life which is revealed in the Word made flesh and given by the Father to all who believe in the Son.

Jesus has nothing to gain in this encounter. Unlike her husbands, he does not seek a contract, whereby she will become his property. Rather he is setting her free to discover genuine selfhood in the truth of God the father. She knows that when the messiah comes he will show her all things. Jesus tells her what she doesn't know: I who speak to you am he. It is his identity which sets the woman free to discover her own.

This dialogue is a type of our Christian lives. We are always being called away, always being persuaded to let go of those aspects of ourselves to which we cling most closely. The woman who has had so many marriages is being wooed by the greatest of lovers, Christ himself, and the same is true of us. Passionately and yet intimately we are encouraged to leave alone our determined desire for material goods, our obsession with worldly power, our desperation for an identity carved out in opposition to others. Gently but powerfully Christ calls us to turn from those things which we think constitute ourselves, to turn to the God who is spirit and discover our true selves not in distinction and pride, not in location or in object, but in the worship of the one who gives life. To look beyond ourselves to the fullness of life, fellowship with God which must mean fellowship with others. Much more than a conversation, God invites us into communion, in this sacrament here and now, in the nuts and bolts of our day to day living. Next time you are disconcerted by talking to a stranger, remember the Samaritan woman, and wonder where the conversation may take you.