



All Saints' Marseille

Sermon

Sunday, 15th March 2020

3rd Sunday of Lent

Year A: Exodus 17.1-7; Romans 5.1-11; John 4.5-42

May I speak in the name of the living God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

The more you look at John's Gospel, the more beautiful it gets. From the majestic Prologue we hear at Christmas ('In the beginning was the Word...'), announcing from the outset that the story of this man changes everything, to the characters it presents and the scenes it describes, it is a profound and arresting document. And the scene in our Gospel reading today is one of the best in it, full of depth and meaning.

Last week John's account told of the encounter between Jesus and Nicodemus, the senior religious leader who comes, in secrecy, by night, and goes silently away, back to a life where admitting an association with Jesus would place him in danger. Today we witness the encounter between Jesus and the woman at the well, which takes place at noon, at the brightest part of the day. The outcome of the encounter is that she tells her community about him, until they also come to see that this man changes everything.

Who is the woman at the well? In contrast to Nicodemus, we are not given her name. We are told that she is a Samaritan and has had a lot of husbands. Some say the reason she has to go to the well at noon to draw water is because that way



she can avoid meeting anyone else. Most people would go to the well in the morning or evening, when it is cooler. It is those in disgrace, ostracized by their community, who have to go in the heat of the day. Or perhaps by setting the scene in the midday sun John is simply highlighting the contrast with Nicodemus's nocturnal caution. Nicodemus leaves his encounter in doubt and darkness; she leaves hers encouraged and enlightened.

One thing about the woman at the well is that she is an outsider who becomes included. The Gospel is full of them. In Jesus's time the Samaritans were a despised minority, for reasons we will explore. As the woman herself remarks, it was unheard of for a Jewish man to request a drink from a Samaritan woman – Jesus was crossing boundaries of ethnicity, culture and gender simply by asking the question. Within the despised minority, the woman herself was marginalised. We learn that she has been divorced five times, at a time when only husbands could instigate divorce. In a society where honour and shame were the benchmarks by which people's acceptability was judged, sometimes to an obsessive degree, Jesus repeatedly crossed boundaries to associate with those whom his society deemed unacceptable – the socially marginalised, people with disabilities or chronic illness, people who were mentally unwell, people who were different, troubled, lonely, estranged. How does the church measure up? It is good for us to ask ourselves who we might be excluding, and why.

Yet for all the differences that separate them, the woman at the well is receptive to Jesus. Once again, we see that in the Gospel it is those least bound up with hierarchies of power and status who are most receptive to the Good News. As Paul suggests in our Epistle today, faith in Christ crucified results in a very different understanding of status, and its power is transformative. Honour and shame cease to matter. What matters, as Paul puts it, is 'sharing in the glory of



God', the revelation of a God nailed to a Cross. Learning that what matters is not honour, but love.

Who is the woman at the well? One thing about her is that she is a model of discipleship, and so a model for us. She is one of a number of memorable, spirited women in John's Gospel who are not pious but refreshingly themselves, far better at understanding Jesus's significance than many of the men. She starts off lippy, but is also courageous and vulnerable. Jesus responds to her with humour and warmth, and although she tries to keep the conversation light-hearted, she slowly realises that what he is telling her is life-changing. When he offers her the water of life, she starts by trying to turn it into a joke, but when he touches on her personal life, she is outwitted. Surprised to find herself understood, accepted for who she is and not condemned by this man who has crossed ethnic, cultural, religious and gender barriers to engage with her, she makes a last attempt to take refuge in generalisations – 'I know that Messiah is coming' – a safe, sometime in the future idea. But Jesus replies: 'It's happening now.' And she accepts the nowness, though not without questioning, wanting to be sure she has understood it. In the end, almost in spite of herself, she becomes an evangelist.

Who is the woman at the well? One thing about her is that she is a symbol of reconciliation. The original hearers of this story could not have failed to think of stories of other women who had been met at wells – Isaac meeting his future wife Rebekah, Jacob meeting Rachel, Moses meeting Zipporah. The signal is that this is going to be a story about a marriage. Yet this woman was a Samaritan, and Jesus was Jewish. We noted earlier that the Samaritans were despised as outsiders (which is why the parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke's Gospel would have been so shocking to his hearers). Although the Samaritans shared a common ancestry with the Jews, they were regarded as impure because they had



intermarried with the invading Assyrians centuries before. The two groups also disagreed about who held the true faith – those from Judah in the south who had been taken as captives to Babylon and then returned to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem, or those from the north who had never left home but who were considered to have collaborated with the enemy. The symbolic ‘marriage’ which, at one level, is taking place in this scene is a reconciliation between the two parts of ancient Israel, a bringing together of Samaria and Judah at the well of their common ancestor Jacob. That would have been a powerful statement in its time. It is good for us as a church to think of our divided communities now, whether along denominational, theological or liturgical lines. What sort of message do we send to a world thirsting for spiritual water? The message of this scene in John’s Gospel is as simple as it is radical: this is a Gospel for the whole world, and no human barriers should prevent it from being heard. How many do we put up, or maintain?

Who is the woman at the well? One thing about her is that she is the recipient of Jesus’s description of his gift to us as ‘living water’ – a spiritual resource that will never run out. St Thomas Aquinas, the medieval theologian, pointed out that in John’s understanding¹ this image refers to the Holy Spirit. He writes: ‘living water is connected with its source and flows from it’. When we receive the grace of the Holy Spirit, he says, ‘the source itself of the grace is also given’, as we are drawn into union with God.

In the Gospels there are many references to water as a source of life. Jesus’s description of it as a source of abundance – ‘gushing up to eternal life’ – would have been a powerful image in a world where water was a scarce commodity. As

¹ John 7.37-38



often in John's Gospel, an ordinary symbol is used to open the hearer to deeper truths.

There's also a link to our Old Testament reading, where the people of Israel are in a state of panic because they have no water in the wilderness. Even though God has rescued them and is bringing them to ultimate safety, they lose faith in God because they lack water. It is only when Moses strikes the rock at Horeb, and water flows from it for them to drink, that their faith is restored and they are able to move on. But the place itself is remembered for their doubting, and the story of their doubting handed down.

For us, the image of living water gushing up to eternal life is a good one to take with us into the coming weeks, as anxiety about the spread of the new coronavirus grows ever more insistent. There is a palpable sense of scarcity, as we are warned that our resources to tackle it are finite and some resort to panic buying in fear that supplies will run out. Yet our faith is in a God who is abundant, whose Spirit is a source of living water that never runs out, even in the heat of the day. The woman at the well receives this message, even if she doesn't fully understand it. What she does know is that it is life-changing. It is good to remind ourselves of God's abundance in our time, however testing. Will we be more like Nicodemus, or more like the woman at the well?

Who is the woman at the well? We will never know. What we do know is that on this day, all over Christendom, her story is being told.

Thanks be to God.