

## Sermon by Revd Stephen Buckley for Lent 3 Yr A - John 4:2-42

Before we begin to look at this morning's Gospel reading let's take a few moments to set it in context. First geographically; Palestine at the time of Jesus was a small country measuring only 120 miles from north to south. In the south lay Judea, in the north Galilee and between them the area known as Samaria. Secondly where was Jesus heading? Well, we're told that in the verses immediately preceding this morning's reading. He and his disciples had left Judea and were heading for Galilee, and the reason for the journey was that there was some argument over who was baptising more disciples Jesus or John. Not wanting to get involved in this controversy Jesus decides to move the centre of his ministry to Galilee, and he makes the decision to pass through Samaria, rather than skirting round which would make the journey far longer. It was not a particularly safe thing to do given the state of relations between Jews and Samaritans. The hostility between the two groups went back hundreds of years. The northern kingdom, Samaria, had been conquered by the Assyrians in 721 BC, and they had transported much of the population. Those who remained intermarried with incoming strangers and, in the eyes of the inhabitants of the southern kingdom Judea, lost the right to be called Jews at all.

In 587 BC Judea was conquered, the Temple was destroyed, and once again many were taken into exile in Babylon. In the books of Ezra and Nehemiah we learn of how, under a new king, Cyrus, the exiles were allowed to return and rebuild the Temple. The Samaritans came and offered to help, but their help was rejected. Angered by this response the Samaritans did everything they could to prevent the Temple being rebuilt. It was around 450 BC when that quarrel took place and it was as bitter as ever in the days of Jesus. It's a sad fact that what was ancient Samaria is now the West Bank; an area still torn apart by conflict, this time between Palestinians and Jewish settlers, and so the ancient troubles persist.

We've asked a number of questions to set the scene and we have one more to ask, the most important question of all, 'How is this the word of the Lord for us today?' What is it in these verses that increases our knowledge of God, deepens our relationship with him and with one another through the words and actions of Jesus?

In his commentary on this passage the Biblical scholar William Barclay says that few stories in the gospels show us so much about the character of Jesus. Firstly, there is the stress on his humanity, he sits there tired and thirsty; exhausted from walking in the heat and dust of the desert. Life is an effort for him as it is for us.

Secondly it shows us the warmth of his personality, the sympathy he has for this woman, this Samaritan. Her immediate reaction upon seeing this Jewish man would be one of hostility, she expected that he would either ignore her or be abusive, it's what she had come to expect. But instead he makes the simple request, 'Give me a drink.'. Words which will begin a conversation which will transform her life. There must have been something about the way Jesus said those words, something about his personality which made her realise that this not someone who would condemn her, and it seems the most

natural thing in the world to talk to Jesus. She has at last met someone who was not a critic, but a friend, one who did not condemn but understood.'

And it shows most importantly for us in the current climate, when we are being encouraged to fear and despise those who are different from us, the stranger and the refugee, Jesus as the one who breaks down barriers. I came here from serving my curacy in Oxford, and when I first arrived there I was intrigued to hear people talk about the Cutteslowe Wall. I was told that in the 1930's a private housing estate was built in the Cutteslowe area of Oxford and right next to it was a council estate which was to house families who had been living in slum accommodation. When the developer of the private estate got wind of this he built two walls right across the roads linking the two estates. They were seven foot high with iron spikes on the top. They were built in 1934 and not demolished until 1959. The walls were a formidable physical barrier and the walls dividing Jesus from the Samaritan woman were no less formidable.

There was the racial/religious wall: as we have heard Jews and Samaritans hated one another.

There was a gender wall: In that culture, a Rabbi did not speak to a woman in public, not even his own wife. There were even Pharisees, who were known as 'the bruised and bleeding pharisees', who went so far as to close their eyes when they saw a woman in the street and consequently walked into things.

And then there was the moral wall. As the conversation unfolds, we learn the woman has had five husbands and is currently living with a man who is not her husband. And possibly the reason she comes alone at the hottest part of the day to draw water, rather than early in the morning with the other women is because she is an outcast in her own society because of her way of life. No decent man, let alone a Rabbi, would have been seen in her company, or even exchanging a word with her, and yet Jesus spoke to her. He ignores every one of these 'keep out' signs. Why? Because grace does not recognize walls.

To quote William Barclay: 'Here is the Son of God, tired and weary and thirsty. Here is the holiest of men listening with understanding to a sorry story. Here is Jesus breaking down barriers of nationality, of orthodox religious custom, of social standing. Here is the beginning of the universality of the gospel; here is God so loving the world, not in theory but in action.' There is much in the way that Jesus' statements are taken literally by the woman that reminds us of a previous encounter Jesus had with Nicodemus. An orthodox Jew, a member of the Jewish ruling council, a man of impeccable reputation, the ultimate insider, in contrast with the woman, the ultimate outsider. Yet both needed what Jesus had to offer them. To Nicodemus he says, 'Very truly I tell you no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above', or as other translations have it, born again.'

Paul in 2 Corinthians V17 tells us what that phrase means, 'When anyone is in Christ there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!' Nicodemus, we assume leaves, maybe not unsurprisingly, not having understood what Jesus means. But clearly the encounter has had an impact on him as when we meet Nicodemus again he is the only member of the Jewish Council to speak up on Jesus' behalf. And following the crucifixion it is Nicodemus who prepares Jesus' body for burial.

To the woman at the well Jesus makes the same offer, the opportunity to turn her life around and be born again, but this time he uses different imagery. Sitting by a well he uses the most obvious analogy that of life-giving water, calling to mind words from psalm 42, 'As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.' Jesus said to her, 'Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.' But as with Nicodemus the woman toman takes his words literally. 'Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water.'

And then comes the moment that changes everything as Jesus reveals that he knows all about her life. He sees all the sadness, the hopelessness, the pain and suffering that her way of life has brought her. And yet there is no condemnation, no rejection, Jesus shows nothing but love and compassion. And maybe it's then that she begins to understand what he means by the gift of life-giving water. The opportunity to begin again knowing that she is washed clean, that the past is forgiven, and she can look forward to the gift of new life knowing herself to be enfolded in the love that Jesus has shown her. I came across this quote which I think sums up Jesus' attitude, and what we can learn from his approach. 'Simply put, Jesus loved her and was prepared to breach age old conventions to reach her. Our failures in evangelism are so often failures in love. Nothing is so guaranteed to draw others to share our living water than an awareness that we genuinely care about them. 'People want to know that we care before they care about what we know.'

As the conversation continues the woman asks where they should worship God, and Jesus makes it clear that the time is coming when none of that will matter. God cannot be confined to a particular place or be the prerogative of a particular people whether it be Samaritan or Jew. The love of God is all embracing, and we are reminded of the words of Paul in his letter to the Galatians, 'There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.'

Then the woman said 'I know that Messiah is coming' (who is called Christ). 'When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us.' And Jesus says, 'I am he, the one who is speaking to you.' And it is at this moment that the disciples return, and the woman taken her cue from their arrival, leaving her precious water jar behind, rushes back to the city to tell others what has happened to her. Once again there must have been something so

different about her, that it makes people who have previously ostracised her listen to what she has to say and take seriously her words about the extraordinary man she has met at the well, 'Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?' An encounter which began with the simple words, 'Give me a drink', have led to this woman becoming the first and most unlikely evangelist in John's Gospel. And so they follow her and having met Jesus they asked him to stay with them; and he stayed there for two days. And many more believed because of his word. They said to the woman, 'It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Saviour of the world.'

To quote again, 'The excluded were included, the circle of God's purpose embraced them too. Having experienced the inclusive love of Jesus, despite the barriers that divided them, it was not a difficult step for the Samaritans to arrive at the conviction that this same love was big enough, wide enough and indiscriminating enough to embrace the whole world.'

So, how is this the word of the Lord for us today? In the emphasis on the inclusive nature of the love of God. He is not in the business of erecting wall but rather building bridges. Uniting and not dividing. To paraphrase the words of Paul, 'In Christ there is no male or female, black or white, gay or straight, citizen or refugee But all are one in Christ.'