

The woman at the well

Third Sunday in Lent

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If someone asked you what your image of Jesus is, what would you say? When I think about that question in times of prayer, I invariably return to this scene of Jesus with this woman. I find something beautiful about a Jesus who is, according to the Evangelist, John, 'tired by the journey' and 'sat straight down by the well. It was about the sixth hour. I find something very human about a Jesus who is literally exhausted from walking and most likely ministering to the crowds. This is a Jesus who is dusty, perspiring, hungry and thirsty, maybe needing personal space from his disciples. This is our God! How close the Christian God is to our own very human experience!

Jesus' hope of some personal space is shattered by the arrival of the Samaritan woman who comes all alone to draw water from the well. This is curious in itself. Any of you who have ever been to the south of Spain, Italy or North Africa in the height of summer know what it's like to be out in the midday sun ('the sixth hour'). You know the old saying Only mad dogs and Englishmen go out in the midday sun. Why is this Samaritan woman coming to draw water at this unlikely hour? Why is she coming to this particular well when we know from archaeology that Jacob's well was about half a mile from the town of Sychar and there were other wells much nearer in the town itself?

I could offer an answer to these puzzling questions. Usually, the womenfolk went to the well in groups in the early morning or much later in the afternoon when it was cool – it was a time to chat and catch up on the local gossip. Was the Samaritan woman ensuring she wouldn't be noticed if she came at high noon? Was she afraid the other women might see her and treat her as a social outcast because she had gone through so many husbands? Was she trying to avoid the jeering and cruel remarks of the other women? She must have felt isolated, lonely, and ostracised.

And then, the most astonishing thing of all, something we in our culture today might find difficult to appreciate fully: Jesus, a Jewish rabbi or teacher, speaks to a Samaritan woman! Shock! Horror! Jews and Samaritans had been sworn enemies for at least four hundred years. Imagine today a Palestinian terrorist and an ultra-orthodox Jew sitting down together for a cosy chat. You have some inkling of how shocking this picture of Jesus and the woman sitting at the well would be to Jesus' contemporaries.

Jesus asked the Samaritan woman to give me a drink as if this wasn't shocking enough. The woman is amazed not only at the request but by the fact that Jesus spoke to her. It was unheard of for a rabbi to speak familiarly with a woman in the open. There was a rule stating, Let no rabbi speak with a woman in public, not even with his own wife, or daughters or sisters!

There's another hidden irony here. If a rabbi did speak to a woman in public, his reputation could be ruined and here is Jesus talking to a woman of notorious character and begging her, "Give me a drink". The woman has already had five husbands and is living with yet another man! Jesus encounters her by the well – in the Old Testament, such a man and woman meeting by the well always leads to a betrothal!

This is an attractive picture of Jesus – a human image once again. He's parched with thirst, but perhaps more importantly, Jesus has no time for racial prejudices and religious narrow-mindedness – he's free of all that rubbish!

He acknowledges the woman as an equal. Jesus is unafraid to show his human need, to beg, even from his country's sworn enemy. All Jesus sees is the person before him; he does not prejudge or condemn her. The woman is astounded that Jesus accepts her readily and treats her with honesty, dignity and respect.

It is precise because Jesus treats her with such sensitivity that she can be candid with him – she can be genuinely herself without fearing being pre-judged or condemned. This so touches her that she notices what she does – she abandons her water jar (a precious thing in itself at that time in Samaria!) and rushes off to share her amazement and joy with the people of the village. She returns to the community she sought to avoid for fear of ridicule. She, a Samaritan, introduces Jesus to other pagans, and they believe in him. This most unlikely woman becomes an ambassador of the Good News of Jesus Christ. She is the first person in John's Gospel to call Jesus 'Lord'. When she asks Jesus if he is the Messiah, Jesus responds EGO EIMI ('I AM') – this is not simply saying 'you've got it at last' but is Jesus making a claim about his divinity.

What might the relevance of this story be for us today? Well, every one of us, no matter how young or old, has a voice within saying, give me a drink – quench my thirst for acceptance, inclusion, respect, love – don't pre-judge me based on sheer externals of colour, religion, appearance. We all wear masks to give the impression that we're solid and self-sufficient when we know deep down that we desperately need the acceptance and encouragement of others. The odd word of encouragement, the invitation to include someone, and the seemingly insignificant signs of respect for each other can have tremendous positive effects – dare I say, they can bring about daily resurrections of hope. We can help each other to encounter Jesus.

So, instead of associating Lent with penance (giving up something), why not make this Lent a time of inclusion, of welcoming someone who is or has become a stranger to you?

AMEN

A Lenten reflection

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