

Sermon for 19.3.17

Today is the third Sunday of Lent and today we hear that wonderful story of the encounter between Jesus and the woman at the well.

Jesus was traveling from Jerusalem in the south to Galilee in the north with his disciples, and they had taken the quickest route, which was through [Samaria](#).

Tired and thirsty, Jesus sat by a well.

Now this well was known as Jacobs well as we hear in the gospel narrative, and it lay in the major fork in the road - one branch turning West to Samaria and Western Galilee the other NE toward Beth-Shan and the Lake of Gennesaret.

Jesus disciples went on to the village of Sychar, about a half mile away, to buy food. It was about noon, the hottest part of the day, and a Samaritan woman came to the well, to draw water.

At this point Jesus initiates the encounter. He asks the Samaritan woman for a drink of water.

Now Samaritans and Jews didn't get along.

Even though they were both Semitic people, both descendants of the original twelve tribes of Israel, the Samaritans had a different worshipping practice.

They worshipped God on Mount Gerazim and refused to recognize the temple of Jerusalem as the central place of worship. Consequently they were despised by traditional Jews.

Naturally, therefore, the Samaritan woman is surprised when Jesus asks her to get him a drink. "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?"

Jesus isn't drawn into debate about their differences, he rather holds the woman in focus and ultimately makes her a promise that the one who drinks the living water he gives, will never be thirsty again.

He tells her that the living water that he speaks about, springs up not from an earthly well, but from the infinite depths of Jesus' own being, which is at the heart of the divine life.

The encounter between them deepens – it is open and at times confrontational.

Jesus tells her he knows about her many relationships, and she responds with acceptance of him and of the truth that he speaks, “Sir I see that you are a prophet.”

I believe what we learn from the honesty of their interaction is relevant in any age, and perhaps particularly more so in our own. For in today’s world we have become rather delicate in terms of facing truth about ourselves– when it is placed before us, it has become the way of things to claim to be offended by it, denying even its possibility, rather than accepting the possibility and looking further for clarity and understanding.

The woman at the well is very different to this however, she travels with Jesus in it.

It’s fair to say, I believe, that she is one of the blessed ones who Jesus talks about in the gospel of Luke chapter 7 –“ blessed is he (or she in this case), who does not take offense at me.”

During the encounter the woman stays with Jesus in every sense of the word. And along the journey she is starting to guess that he is more than the prophet she first thought.

After their interchange about differences related to worship, she claims the Messiah as the true teacher, “I know that Messiah is coming, who is called the Christ. When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us.” And it is at this point that Jesus reveals to her that he indeed is the Messiah!

A most amazing revelation of God and to a woman - an “unclean” Samaritan woman, held in contempt by many; for her gender, her beliefs and her personal sense of morality, yet exalted totally by the Lord of all.

We can search the New Testament and we will find that Jesus told very few people who He really was. The woman at the well was one of the exalted few.

It is plain to see in this encounter that Jesus did not condemn the woman - he revealed all about her for one reason and that was to transform her.

And she believed in him – and with her belief, came her acceptance not just of Jesus but also of herself.

Transformed she was running to town and preaching to and teaching both men and women. The woman's response to Jesus becomes infectious. The whole town catches it.

This gospel story presents the Samaritan woman as the first missionary. Both Origen, theologian of the 3rd Century, (died 254) and Theophylactus, theologian and bible commentator of the 11th Century *considered her an apostle*.

In this encounter we see that both truth and grace are vital to transformation. The woman had most likely experienced plenty of truth about herself and her transgressions; and perhaps as a result went to the well at a time when no one else did – in the middle of the day - so that she could avoid others.

But here at the well, in the fork of the road, at the juncture of her life, she receives the freedom of grace, in relation to the God of the gospels, the God of Jesus, the God Jesus is.

As Rowan Williams writes in our Lenten study book, *Being Disciples*,

the gospel of God, as the New Testament puts it before us, is good news about an eternal presence, an agency and intelligence wholly committed to who we are and who we shall become. It is wholly committed to our growth into what we are made to be....

God offers us life, peace, presence to ourselves and to him; a gift that, in T.S. Eliot's words, costs us 'not less than everything', yet in another sense costs nothing at all, because gift is what it is.¹

With the story of the encounter between Jesus and the woman at the well fresh in our hearts, may we reflect on the gift of the eternal presence of God the Son in our lives, and what this means for us personally during this week of lent.

Pray the collect together.

The Lord be with you.

¹ Rowan Williams, "Being Disciples: Essentials of the Christian Life". William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company: Michigan, 2016. p35.

