

THE WOMAN NEEDING WATER

During Lent this year we are invited to listen in to some of the conversations which Jesus had with people. Last week we listened in to Nicodemus, and this week we have a very different person, with very different questions and responses. This week we travel to Samaria and meet a woman.

Read John 4:1-6

Jesus, we learn from the end of chapter 3, is at this time in the Judean countryside - in other words he is around Jerusalem. And there he is causing quite a stir. The rumours are flying, though already, as John tells us, the rumours are not quite accurate - rumours so seldom are! Anyway Jesus realises that he has come to the attention of the Pharisees and that this is not the time for a showdown with those of the Pharisees who are affronted by him. (Not all the Pharisees did find Jesus threatening. Look at Nicodemus. There were two parties of Pharisees, and it was the Shamai who would be those who found Jesus hardest to take. The other group, the Hillel, in fact taught along very similar lines to Jesus. The difference was that one group was inward looking, seeking to preserve the holiness of Israel, while the other group looked outward, seeking to let Israel be a light to the nations.) Anyway, it wasn't time for the big confrontation. Jesus had a lot more teaching to do first. So he headed north, back to his own part of the country. And he had to go through Samaria.

He did not! If you look at maps it is quite obvious that there was another way he could have gone - the way that Jews usually went, in fact. Not he had to go, not for geographic reasons but from an inner conviction. Maybe God was sending him there; maybe the Holy Spirit was leading him; maybe he was curious as to how the Samaritans would receive him and his message. Maybe all of these things. He had an inner compulsion, and, like most of our compulsions, it probably had more than one component to it.

Jesus had to go through Samaria. Do we pay attention to our own inner curiosity or convictions? God can use them to guide us. But that doesn't mean that following them will be plain sailing. The day was hot and by noon Jesus was tired out.

Read v:7-12

The disciples go off and the woman arrives. Perhaps she was waiting until the crowd had gone. A group of thirteen men would be quite a lot for one woman to confront, even if she is on home territory and they are strangers. She would know from Jesus' dress that he was a Jew, a good Jew (we too know that Jesus was a good Jew - that is why it is noted when he does things which are a departure from good Jewish behaviour) and as a good Jew she would not expect him to speak to her - or to respond to her if she spoke. But Jesus breaks the conventions and a real conversation is what follows.

Jesus tells her of his need - he wants some water. He makes himself vulnerable to this foreign woman. Now it is in her power to help or to deny him. No wonder she is blown away. No wonder she questions why he is doing this.

I wonder what conversations never happen because we observe the conventions. When some one says "How are you?" we observe the conventions and say "Fine, or "No bad." But if we opened up a little and said what was making us

rejoice, or what was troubling us, what sort of conversation might then follow. If we allow people into our lives, there is a chance that they might discover our faith, might even discover our God there, all mixed up, as he is, with the reality of our untidy lives. If, when people ask “Can I do anything?” we did ask something of them, allowed ourselves to be in their debt, would there not be more chance of real conversation occurring?

Jesus breaks convention and he sparks question. He responds to the question and sparks more question, because he doesn't justify his request, but instead he goes on to say that actually he has something to offer.

Prayer for those who need reality, who need to serve and to be served.

Read v:13-15

Jesus offers living water. It sounds good. In Jesus' day the phrase was used to refer to running water - a spring or a stream which was more likely to be fresh than pools or wells where the water might stagnate. But Jesus isn't meaning this. What he says makes it clear he is talking about something quite different, something for which all water on earth is a signpost, a pointer, a reminder. He doesn't spell out just what this living water, this ultimate refreshment, is, but he has said enough for the woman to know that she wants it.

When we crave refreshment, the we do well to turn to Jesus, who promises the easy load, the lightened burden, who promises us rest. But then, like this woman, we might be in for a surprise. Jesus has living water to offer all right, but when you drink it, it will change every area of your life.

Hymn 722 Spirit of God, come dwell within me.

Read v:16-26

There is a tendency, begun, I think by John's attitude, to despise this woman for her past. She has had five husbands! Yes, but remember that in her day she had no power to rid herself of a husband. She was wed for life each time, unless one partner died, or unless the man took it into his head to divorce her. And then he need only say “I divorce you, I divorce you, I divorce you” and it was a fait accompli. Maybe the woman was hard to live with, but maybe she was just a bad picker - desperate not to be on her own. It might be that after her experiences of marriage co-habiting seemed safer to her, a less vulnerable proposition, even though it made her an outcast.

Whatever the ins and outs of her circumstances, you can be fairly sure that her self-esteem was pretty low. But she needs a man around, or she will starve. Who knows how she had first viewed Jesus? You could even read an element of challenging flirtation into the first part of their conversation. But not now. Now Jesus shows her that he knows about her, and she gives him more respect. Now she addresses him as “Sir”.

But now also, she tries to avoid the real issues. She still asks questions, but they are not like the questions she had before: they are not called up by the context of the well and the offer of the living water. She is afraid, because here is someone who knows her.

In our conversations with others, there will often come the insincere question. This woman asked about where to worship, we might be asked “Who made God?” or

“What about evil?” Hard questions, and questions which deserve a thought through answer, when they are asked from a genuine desire to know. But if they are asked to avoid letting faith become personal, that is different.

Jesus handles it very well - he brings it back to the personal - to how true worship is about the condition of the heart, not the place; to how he himself is the bringer of truth.

When our encounters with God get personal it can be alarming. But it is then that it becomes most meaningful as well.

Pause for silent prayer

Read v:27-30

The disciples return and they exhibit extraordinary restraint. John remarks on it. These are the men who turn away little children, who try to call down fire on opponents, who often try to shoo the crowds off and give Jesus some peace. But now they say nothing.

However the woman leaves. Thirteen is too many for personal conversation. Besides she has heard enough - enough to excite her, to make her want to tell others. If the disciples silence is unusual for them, I am sure that the woman's proclamation is unusual for her. she runs off and drags people to see Jesus. She is so excited. When did your faith last excite you like this? And what about Jesus? How does he react? He has “had” to come through Samaria. What does he think of what has happened here.

Read v:31-38

Jesus has talked about living water to the woman, not to disciples he talks of hidden food. Remember that they have gone off to find food for him as well as for themselves and at that point he has not stopped them. But now he feels no need to eat. He is, in his own way, as excited as the woman. The Samaritans will respond to him. His message will take root not only in Israel but outside it. He is right to think that he can bring God's word to the whole world. The thought of a brand new field being opened up for harvest was exciting. He is delighted as he quotes the proverb - four months till harvest - which means that some things take time, and says “No! The seed has just been planted, but the harvest is now, already, in the blink of an eye this time!”

If you ever thought that Jesus didn't care how people took him, but just went on regardless, then this story gives that idea the lie. Jesus did care. Yes, he went on even when he was misunderstood or rejected, but when he was understood and accepted, it made him so happy so excited, so much so that, at least for a while, he is all full up, with no room even for food.”

Our response to Jesus can bring him delight and joy. Other people's responses to Jesus scan make us so excited that we even forget to eat. It all begins with making ourselves available to them, to bending or breaking a few useless conventions, and allowing ourselves to be real with people. It all begins with following the convictions of our hearts and accepting the adventure that God sends.

Read v:39-42.

Amen.