

St George's Anglican Church Malvern

Third Sunday in Lent Year A

23 March 2014

Exodus 17.1-7

Psalm 95

Romans 5.1-11

John 4.5-42

Today Jacob's well is in the crypt of a church in Nablus, in Israel. It is still deep, about 70 feet. The water is cool, fresh, clear. It is lovely to drink – and last year some of us here did just that. I hope I can convey to you this morning something of what a richly symbolic story this is as John the Evangelist tells it. Yet is not difficult to imagine what a profoundly human story this is, this encounter between the woman and Jesus one hot midday, about 40 kms north of Jerusalem.

She's just called "the woman at the well." We don't even know her name. Jesus talks to her in public and in the middle of the day. Everyone in her village knows who she is. But we aren't even told her name. We are told Nicodemus' name. He came by night, secretly and afraid of who might find out. This unnamed woman is no Nicodemus. She is not a "teacher in Israel", she is a despised Samaritan and she has a theological conversation with Jesus and becomes a preacher. She is forthright. She says what she thinks. She discovers more than she ever imagined. And she clearly became an effective evangelist! Samaria was to become a stronghold of Christian faith.

This story of the unnamed woman at the well is about a conversation which should not have happened. It is a story about social conventions being ignored. The disciples are left shocked and speechless by Jesus' behaviour. It is a story about moving from suspicion to faith. It is about the deepest thirst being satisfied and learning to accept no substitutes.

Jesus the Jew and his Jewish friends travel through Samaria, territory belonging to people from whom the Jews were estranged. I don't mean they just didn't get along. Jews and Samaritans had a legacy of hundreds of years of deep antagonism to one another by Jesus' time. It went back to the rebuilding of the Temple in Jerusalem after its destruction by the Babylonians. The Jews had rebuffed the Samaritans when they wanted to share in the project.

The Samaritans had developed hybrid religious customs, and practiced idolatry so the Jews said. They said that because the Assyrians who had invaded Samaria in 722BC brought in foreigners, Persians and Medes, and the woman is descended from the intermarriage that happened as a result. The antagonism between Jews and Samaritans had all the hallmarks of the hatred between people who have a shared heritage. The Samaritans have a different story of course. They say they are the only true descendents of Moses and the first five books of the bible said to be written by Moses, are the only ones they read.

By the first century, Jews going from Jerusalem to Galilee bypassed Samaria to avoid the defilement of going there. Not so Jesus who taught that defilement came from within. John the gospel writer says "but he had to go through Samaria." Maybe he was avoiding dissension between his disciples and John the Baptist's. We can't be sure.

An aside: If we can grasp how deep this hatred was, we begin to understand the extraordinary challenge Jesus presents in the story of the good Samaritan who looked after the beaten up Jew, and the one cured leper who came back and said thank you who was a Samaritan – but these are Luke's stories. Back to John's gospel.

Jesus is thirsty. Of course, he and the disciples are walking. Hot, tired, hungry and thirsty Jesus sits down on the capstone of Jacob's well. He ought to have been carrying a traveller's leather

bucket that was kept flat until cross sticks were put inside to keep it open to use. The capstone of Jacob's well, on which I have also sat, is about 20 inches high, and about 5 feet across.

For Jesus, it's very cheeky, even provocative, given the situation. The well is rich with associations for Jews and Samaritans, part of their shared and disputed history. It was here that Jacob, twin brother of Esau, father of Joseph, the one who lived in Egypt, and ancestor of the twelve tribes of Israel, had watered his sheep. It was where Jacob met his first love and second wife, Rachel. (Remember he was tricked into marrying her sister Leah first.)

When the foreign woman comes along, Jesus should have moved away. Custom said about 20 feet away would signal to the woman that it was safe for her to approach the well. Drawing water was women's work. When the parish pilgrims went to Jacob's well last year our guide looked around to ask a woman to let the bucket down.

Jesus asks her for a drink. That's more than cheeky. It is a serious violation of custom. Men did not speak to unknown women in public. She is astonished for this, and another reason. Jews considered Samaritans ritually impure.

Drinking from her bucket would render Jesus unable to go into the Temple without first ritually cleansing himself. He tells the woman that he who asks for water from the well could give her "living water." She takes him literally. She is suspicious of who he is, a Jew and now she must think he is a little deluded, if not foolish. She says, "You, you, give me any kind of water – you don't even have a bucket!" But she is interested and wonders what this "living water" is about, and where it is found. She is moving beyond suspicion now, edging towards faith, but she is not there yet.

Jesus suggests she call her husband and come back. No, why does he do that? He seems to know she has had five husbands and another one now, who is not hers. He doesn't tell her off. He doesn't demand she explain. He must realise, given the divorce laws, that a woman with five husbands has been discarded five times. The woman could not have taken any initiative in divorce. And the reasons for sending a wife away about which Jesus expresses his anger elsewhere in the other gospels, could be as trivial as burning the dinner.

Yet Jesus risks this woman's further hurt, and her rejection of him, and suggests she fetch her "husband." The woman understands. She recognises that Jesus is a prophet and insightful about people and circumstances.

This moment of honesty on her part, and risk on his, takes them further into their conversation. Suspicion is now surprise, edging closer to faith.

Of course, there could be a different explanation for the conversation about husbands. The house of Jacob – this is Jacob's well- stood accused of idolatry. It was said by the prophet Jeremiah (Jer.2) that they had acted like an unfaithful wife to God who was wedded to his people in a covenant of love. In the Book of Kings (2 Kgs.17) exactly *five* nations are listed as infecting the true worship of God with idolatry. Five previous husbands are symbolic of Samaria's history as a people invaded and taken over by foreigners. The current "man" may well have been Rome, with whom the Samaritans lived in an unholy alliance.

I think this is the correct way to understand that conversation. The woman's reply confirms it. She begins to talk about matters of worship and of truth, not personal morality. Nationality and religious loyalty now come to the fore. Jesus' answer goes way beyond, to the heart of the matter.

True worship takes place not on disputed mountains, but in spirit, wherever there are “those born not human will but of God” – that is to say, those who are reborn as the followers of Jesus.

The story of the Samaritan woman and her people encountering the Saviour of the world is the story of a people reborn of the will of God.

Stories of men meeting women at wells are common in the Hebrew scriptures. Jacob, whose well this is, met his wife Rachel in that same place. Jesus meets not a young girl but a mature woman who is looking for the truth. Jesus is not looking for a wife but for “worshippers in spirit and truth.”

The end result though, is a kind of wedding. The last time we heard of Jesus drawing water in John’s gospel is at Cana in Galilee, at a real wedding. This time, Jesus is the bridegroom, and the bride the Samaritan people once lost to false love and false religion. Jesus has declared himself to this representative woman in a great “I am” statement, the first of more to come in the next two weeks.

The bond is formed, and the joy is real. The unnamed woman has come to faith. Never mind we do not know her name. If we share her thirst for God, we will share her faith.

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