

The thirsty Messiah

John 4:5-42

19 March 2017

A big 'thank you' to John, Hazel and Ian, for bringing this well-known and much loved Biblical story to life for us! Hearing it in the form of a conversation, rather than as a straight forward recital of an ancient tale, may just help us to understand why the amazing author of John's Gospel presented the encounter this way. In the description of Jesus' meeting with the Samaritan woman at the well the form of the story becomes as important as its content: It is in conversation, in dialogue that things happen. It is in the space between the conversation partners that God 'turns up'. And as Jesus demonstrates, God chooses conversation as a way of engaging with us. A real conversation, one that carries the promise of a relationship, is a two-way, mutual process; it supposes some kind of equality between the partners. You all know people, I'm sure, for whom conversation means telling you about their interesting experiences, dazing you with their wit or brilliance in their field of expertise, but leave you no room for participation. They can make you feel inferior and ignorant, and, frankly, disempowered.

Jesus shows another way. The first thing he does, on meeting this nameless, foreign, woman, is he acknowledges his own vulnerability: "I am thirsty, can you help me?" He might have access to 'living water', but at this moment in time he is just plain thirsty and he is willing to put himself in the power of the woman, who has the bucket after all! In our Lent Course on Wednesday we were talking about an appropriate attitude of awe and wonder when we approach God. And that is surely the right and necessary way from our point of view, but if Jesus is to be believed, God loves vulnerability (*Richard Rohr: The Divine Dance*) and doesn't seem to be too choosy of where and in what way to turn up in our lives: in a crying baby, a hungry or thirsty foreigner, in an overworked teacher, an unappreciated healer, or even on a criminal's cross. And because of that, against all the odds which could have turned this meeting into a disaster, a freely flowing, real conversation can start up between Jesus and the woman. Facing the stranger's openly admitted need enables the woman to realise her own need for conversation, for meaningful, purposeful relationship, for some exchange of ideas

about the reality beyond buckets and wells and man-made boundaries, in other words, for the living water she's being offered.

We are now well into Lent, which some Christians are beginning to use more and more for taking on a new spiritual practice rather than giving up some luxury habits. It might be worth trying to strike up a meaningful conversation with someone we never talk to, because they sit on the other side of the church from us, or with some one outside the church, whom we suspect of being quite different from us.

Coming back to the biblical conversation in hand, in a way, it is a pity that the flow of the living water is interrupted by the middle section of the conversation, which seems to centre round the woman's five husbands. Though it has its serious purpose in the mind of the Gospel writer, but unfortunately, it has opened up the story to be understood merely in terms of the woman's morals and has given rise to all sorts of speculations about her loose living in the minds of those who prefer a literal understanding of the text. But if we listen closer, as we had the chance of doing a few minutes ago, we may have noticed that there was no real reason, why Jesus should have suddenly asked the woman to call her husband. Did he really want to shame her? It would have been a very un-Jesus like thing to do. In any case, it is a kind of break in the logic of what is being discussed, which is the difference between the Jewish and the Samaritan customs of living and worship.

Could it be that we are again faced with this Gospel writer's propensity to talk in metaphors, and engage the mind on different levels all at the same time, just as we were last Sunday with the story of Nicodemus, when an old man was asked to contemplate being born again?

Well, it has been noticed by some biblical interpreters that the reference to the five husbands may be a historical reference to an event that has originally brought about the deep-rooted enmity between Jews and Samaritans, and, in fact, explains why they worship at different places and different ways. When in 721 BCE the Assyrians conquered the Northern Kingdom of Israel, some of the population was deported to Assyria and the towns of Samaria were re-populated by people of FIVE foreign nations and these are listed in the second book of Kings (2 Kings 17:24). Of course, this produced inter-marriages and a dilution of religious practices within Israel, who later became known as Samaritans. So the woman at the

well is more like a composite figure symbolising the whole people of Samaria, who, from a Jewish point of view, were not faithful, but adopted some of the ways of the five resettled nations. Hence the five husbands! If this is the case, then Jesus is commenting on the Samaritans' historical origins caused by the imperial policies of occupying powers and not on the woman's private life.

Either way, the overall meaning shows Jesus crossing major boundaries of national, religious and gender divides at the expense of overcoming his own Jewish social and cultic traditions. A real conversation, you see, in which the living water is allowed to flow, is transformative to both parties. Jesus' solution to the differences is not the standard Jewish solution of his time and neither is it our solution. Just think, what would be our natural inclination in talking to a Sikh, Muslim or Hindu friend. We would want to talk to them about our God, invite them to our church, tell them where they have gone wrong in their theology. Yet Jesus doesn't say: Your religion is mistaken; Mount Gerazim is not the place to worship God. Come and worship in the Temple in Jerusalem. He points to a way beyond the things that divide them and concludes the conversation by revealing in himself the God as God was known before the Jewish Samaritan separation. When he reacts to the woman's mention of the expected Messiah, he says "I am he, I who am speaking to you". At least that's how it is in our translation, but the word 'he' is not in the original text. There, Jesus says I AM, echoing God's name revealed to Moses at the burning bush. In that revelation there was no distinctions made. Under this God no one is excluded, this holy name calls all to faithfulness and draws all of us beyond any human barriers, divides or prejudices.

At this point, surprisingly, the woman gets it and without a moment's delay, she dashes off and becomes a herald of the good news of Jesus Christ. Here then is the blueprint for us would-be missionaries on how to cross dividing boundaries, how to share the living water with others, how to approach marginalised people, the so-called 'outsiders'? How to talk about the God of our life in a way that might be an answer to other people's thirst? We may not be called to say I AM, but the story's outcome and Jesus' promise is that once we open ourselves to the living water, the ever-moving Spirit imparted to him and through him to all of us, that living water will bubble up inside us. It will not be contained and it will flow within us, through us and even in spite of us, as Richard Rohr, the well-known Franciscan

teacher is so fond of saying. So the woman runs to her town with her great news leaving behind her water jar, symbol of her thirst and self-sufficiency. She doesn't need it any more, she has found something more important, some one more important and she has to share the experience.

I love the fact that this woman all through the story keeps talking cross-purposes with Jesus, and though she seems to have an answer, or a new question to everything Jesus has to say and that by the end she is still not quite sure she understands things rightly: "Could this be the Messiah?" she wonders, yet she ends up so full of enthusiasm that she can't keep still. It is very encouraging that in the flow of the living water we can forget about our pre-occupation with our unsuitability and stop concentrating on things we can't do. In spite of all the negative things that have been written, said and preached about this woman, in a joyful flourish she actually becomes the first missionary to the Samaritans, her people begin to believe because of the transformation in her. They come to Jesus because of her; they will arrive at an even deeper insight about Jesus than she has, because of her. They become convinced that what they have found in Jesus is well beyond their individual or communal salvation, they discover something of the power and the love of the living God, which has universal significance.

This is how the author Sara Miles sums up the story of The Woman at the Well: "Salvation does not depend on getting things right. It depends on thirst." (Sara Miles: Jesus Freak) My prayer for us this Lent is that we may dare to trust our thirst and our hunger however deeply they are hiding in our souls: set them free and let them guide us to the source of the living water and the bread of heaven. Christ is inviting us to his table now and will satisfy us.

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