

Breaking the barriers

Exodus 17:1-7, John 4:3-30, 40-42

The image of the Samaritan woman's encounter with Jesus at the well is one of the most iconic pictures in the New Testament. If you Google it virtually hundreds of images will come up, portraying Jesus and the woman in every possible artistic genre. There are simple pencil drawings, Orthodox icons, renaissance paintings, stained glass windows, modern minimalist depictions, children's cartoons and film clips. Almost every one of them could be the base of a different sermon. I dare say those of us who heard the story again today would remember hearing more than one sermon about it, as it comes up in the Lectionary with great regularity.

Amongst all those images, this time a particular one caught my eye. It stood out because it didn't show either the figure of Jesus or the woman. The whole picture is taken up by the top of a stone well, on which stands an empty bucket. It is a well-crafted well and a nuanced capture of a bucket. Describing it in this literalist way though, doesn't do full justice to the painting and may not satisfy the viewer if that's all they get out of it. Anybody standing in front of this work of art would recognise how in its striking simplicity it is saying a lot more than just a bucket and a well. I wondered what a non-religious person would make of it. Their first thought would probably not be Jesus meeting a woman at a well. But the symbolism of the painting could still be meaningful to them. They would almost certainly think of water, the significance of water, the need for water, the possibility of access to water and the hope that the well, which is shown in blazing sunshine with a deep shadow inside, is actually contains fresh, life giving drinking water.

In a way, this is how John's Gospel seems to operate and only reading it this way, will it yield its full richness. There is a picture, well-crafted and nuanced, but finding the symbolic meaning beyond it can be so worthwhile, and may be a great help to get closer to the Gospel writer's original intentions.

Water, of course has many different applications both in our lives and in Scripture. We have already mentioned some of the former in the Theme Introduction. When we turn to the Bible we find water everywhere! There is water on the very first page before the Creation of the world, when the Spirit of God hovers over the surface. And there is water on the last page, where the water of life

is offered as a gift to everyone who is thirsty. In between, water can appear in the form of flood, which carries Noah's Ark. It can turn into blood, in the river Nile during the Israelites' escape from Egypt. It can drown the Egyptians as they pursue the Israelites. But it can also symbolise the life-giving presence of God, as in our first reading, as well, as providing meeting places for marriage-making or peace-making. And water can form boundaries, which divide people from one another.

Jacob's well, where the Samaritan woman meets Jesus, seems to carry more than one of these meanings. It is a meeting place, yes, but in spite of their common ancestry, this particular water, in this particular well, at this particular Samaritan location serves more like a series of barriers that divide them. And as the story unfolds, we witness Jesus crossing those barriers one by one until finally he reaches common ground with the woman and entrusts her with a great revelation about himself. Lent may be a good time to reflect on the boundaries we face, or erect around ourselves and learn from Jesus how to cross them.

There is the boundary which existed between the Jewish people and the Samaritans for long centuries. It started after Solomon's Kingdom when the ten Northern tribes separated themselves from Judah in the South and were overrun by the Assyrians. The newly emerged mixed population retained and strengthened the animosity with Judah and by Jesus' time they counted each other sworn enemies. They avoided each other, they followed different religious observances, they worshipped in different places and they certainly wouldn't share drinking vessels.

So travelling through Samaria Jesus comes along and meets a Samaritan woman. The Gospel writer then describes a personal meeting, some details of which alert us to the fact that there may be more to the story than merely a chance meeting. The woman is not just any woman; she is a Samaritan, on one level she is standing for the Samaritans as a nation. Jesus would be fully justified and true to his Jewish traditions if he ignored her and let her go on her way. But he doesn't, he steps over the historical, national barrier and by engaging the woman in conversation he declares that Samaria too has access into the new era he is ushering in.

Sometimes, this is the hardest step, to engage in conversation with people we don't like, or fear, or count as our enemies and to forge a relationship with them. It is so much easier to

avoid them. Even doing things for them is easier than be available to them, to share with them our common humanity. Once a conversation is established, it's bound to turn personal. And so it does with Jesus. Some commentators down the ages revel in their condemnation of the woman's past putting on it the worst possible explanations. Perhaps they are doing it with the best of intentions trying to emphasise Jesus' willingness to accept the woman as she is.

Others though draw our attention to the symbolic meaning following the idea that the woman stands for the Samaritans as a whole. For them, the five husbands are not to be understood in a moralistic sense. It is a reference to a passage in the Jewish Scriptures, where in the 2nd Book of Kings (17:24-34) the king of Assyria, having conquered the Northern Kingdom had brought in new settlers from five different, named areas even providing them with an Israeli priest to teach them the worship of the God of the land. But the people were not faithful to God; they inter-married with the new settlers and worshipped their five different gods and made sacred shrines for them. So, this is all included in the baggage that shores up the barrier between Jews and Samaritans, the barrier that Jesus demolishes with the simple sentence: 'Give me a drink.' I, for one, prefer this interpretation. I find it difficult to recognise the Jesus I know in this encounter, if I have to remain with the surface meaning of Jesus delving into the woman's past merely to remind her of her guilt or to humiliate her.

Then, there is another barrier being crossed here too as the conversation takes place between 'a holy man' and an unmarried woman. The disciples are scandalised by this even though they don't dare to voice their objections. At the end of a week when International Women's Day has been celebrated, perhaps it is appropriate to mention that Jesus' new era also included an equal treatment for women together with other groups on the margins of society. And according to New Testament witness he is portrayed as having his deepest theological discussions with women. Gender equality may not be our problem but we know that there are still many societies in the world, where it is, and we also know that even in our society the struggle for it goes on. Jesus shows the way for us the path we are to follow in this matter.

The conversation also highlights some religious barriers between the two parties as the subject of the right place to worship

God is raised. One of the greatest sticking point between Jews and Samaritans was the question of whether Mount Gerazim in Samaria or the Jerusalem Temple on Mount Zion was the proper place to meet God. It may have been a problem that exercised the mind of this woman, but here again it is more helpful to see this question being symbolically raised by all the Samaritans. Jesus crosses this barrier by stepping over his own Jewish tradition as he points out that it's not where we worship, but how we worship that matters.

This is where we can learn a lot ourselves. Our own Christianity is greatly divided according to where and how we worship, not to mention our Multi-Faith society in which we are surrounded by those worshipping differently from us. According to Jesus true worship is done in spirit and in truth. Of course, we all think our way is the best and we can even look down on those, who do religion in other ways.

I was awakened to this when some years ago we travelled to India with a group from AFC. One of the highlights of our trip was visiting the Golden Temple in Amritsar, the beautiful Sikh centre of worship. As we walked round inside I was surprised to see ordinary people huddled in all corners outside the formal service pouring over their sacred Scriptures. There was no mistaking their true devotion. They hardly noticed all the tourists coming and going around them, they were so engrossed in their worshipful reading. I remember wishing we could be a bit like that and thinking 'who am I to judge these people for their lack of true worship?' Jesus breaks down the religious barriers and calls us to do the same.

Finally, the woman at the well, having understood who Jesus really was, runs off to her town to tell her people about her discovery. And surprise, surprise! They believe her straight away putting a question mark behind the interpretation that she is a promiscuous outcast, who is despised in her own town. So, may be the empty bucket on that picture, we were talking about earlier, is the bucket she has left behind. When Jesus reveals himself to her by the name 'I am', the very name which introduces God at the burning bush she finds living water, which comes straight from the source. It gushes through her and makes her a very effective missionary to her own people. May the Spirit of our generous God satisfy our spiritual thirst and flow through us to others as it did through her. Let it be so.

Erna Stevenson