

LENT REFLECTION 2

THE WOMAN AT THE WELL – JOHN 4: 5-35

So he came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon. A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, 'Give me a drink'. (His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.) The Samaritan woman said to him, 'How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?' (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.) Jesus answered her, 'If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, "Give me a drink", you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water.' The woman said to him, 'Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?' Jesus said to her, 'Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.' The woman said to him, 'Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water.'

Jesus said to her, 'Go, call your husband, and come back.' The woman answered him, 'I have no husband.' Jesus said to her, 'You are right in saying, "I have no husband"; for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!' The woman said to him, 'Sir, I see that you are a prophet. Our ancestors worshipped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem.' Jesus said to her, 'Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.' The woman said to him, 'I know that Messiah is coming' (who is called Christ). 'When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us.' Jesus said to her, 'I am he, the one who is speaking to you.'

Just then his disciples came. They were astonished that he was speaking with a woman. Then the woman left her water-jar and went back to the city. She said to the people, 'Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?'

Meanwhile the disciples were urging him, 'Rabbi, eat something.' Jesus said to them, 'My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work. Do you not say, "Four months more, then comes the harvest"? But I tell you, look around you, and see how the fields are ripe for harvesting.'

Collect

Eternal God,
give us insight
to discern your will for us,
to give up what harms us,
and to seek the perfection we are promised
in Jesus Christ our Lord.

Reflection

Outside of the passion narrative, this story of 'the woman at the well' is one of the longest Gospel passages selected in the liturgical year. It is the first of three long Gospels we hear on these three Sundays of Lent each year when traditionally there are candidates for Baptism.

In the passage Jesus takes rest at the sixth hour (midday) AT what would have been the hottest part of the day. (4:4-6) Jesus chooses Jacobs well (Genesis 38:18-19), and a time when there would normally have been no one there. Wells were generally visited twice a day, morning and evening. (4:4-6)

Jesus is joined by a Samaritan woman, who comes to draw water. The time of day is an odd time to be at the well, and is perhaps indicative of the woman wishing to do so undisturbed. (4:7) The woman does not know who Jesus is and at the beginning of the passage sees him only as a visiting Jew. (4:9)

The Samaritans and Jews would not normally share eating vessels and no self-respecting Jew would talk to a Samaritan woman, with a known sinful situation, in public. Jesus showing us that in order to share the Gospel we must cross boundaries and barriers.(4:9)

Jesus asks the woman for a drink and when the woman replies with “How can you ask me for a drink?” highlighting their difference, Jesus takes the conversation to a spiritual context and talks of the gift of God and living water. This looks back to Old Testament verses that speak of thirsting for God as one thirsts for water (Psalm 42:1 Isaiah 55:1 etc). Jesus recognises a need for spiritual fulfilment in the woman and in this context, by talking of offering living water, Jesus was showing his identity as Messiah, as only the Messiah could give the gift that can satisfy the thirsting of the soul. (4:10) The woman remains confused as to what kind of water the conversation is alluding to, and is perplexed with the parallel functions of physical thirst and spiritual thirst. (4:13-15) The woman then further misinterprets what Jesus means and begins to think she will have physical water forever and will never have to return to the well, and that he was trying to make her life easier. This illustrates for us that Christ did not come to make life easier, to take away life’s challenges but to change us on the inside and to empower us to deal with problems with and through God. (4:15)

Jesus then shifts the conversation to the woman’s private life, about which he knows details he could not possibly know. The woman tries to change the subject, obviously embarrassed. Illustrative of how Christ challenges all of us, knowing our sins are known to him, to turn from sin to him. (4:16-20) The woman then brings up a theological issue, the question of where to worship. Perhaps as an attempt to move the focus from her and her sins. Jesus deals with this by explaining that the location of the worship is not nearly as important as the attitude of the worshipper. (4:20-24) Jesus then talks of “salvation from the Jews”, alluding to the fulfilment of the prophecies of old (Genesis 12:3) and the predicted coming of the Messiah. The woman would have been aware of the prophecies and the coming Messiah. This passage shows her eyes being opened as to whom she speaks. (4:22-25)

Jesus then talks of the spiritual harvest. Using food to represent his spiritual nourishment. By talking of what we give out as well as what we take in for God, there is a message about completing God’s work on Earth. (4:34) Jesus talks of the fields, “they are ripe for harvest”. Telling the woman that all around us there is a continual harvest of people to be made in to believers, if we would only look and see. (4:35)

The Samaritan woman encountered Jesus and was changed by that encounter. Despite her sins and her station in life, she had encountered God and needed to share it with others. So powerful was her encounter, she convinced many others from her town to listen to Jesus. To have an encounter with him and to be changed by that encounter. (4:39-42)

There is something in this passage that talks of difference and division between Jesus and the woman to whom he speaks. An obvious physical difference, and yet also a spiritual one. Yet this difference both physical and of this world and the spiritual, are no barrier for Jesus. The conversation is very much one of mutual respect, if not initially of understanding.

Jesus challenges the woman and her understanding of her faith and through that challenge her eyes are opened to the very real presence of God here on earth, both in the actual presence of the Messiah but also in his word and teachings.

Christ undoubtedly changes us, despite our sin, our shortcomings. Allowing an encounter with Christ, we allow Christ to live in us and us in him. This inevitably leads to a change and when that change is seen by others, they also may be made disciples of Christ.

Michael Dyne

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER OR DISCUSS

In this passage Jesus and the woman have to cross the cultural boundaries of race, religion and gender. How relevant is this to our society today?

When we encounter those who are different from us, (gender, religion, politics, class, LGBTQ+) how do we see the image of God, the ‘imago dei’ in them?

How does this passage fit into the Easter narrative?

How does this passage encourage and inspire your faith and its journey?