

Sermon for 11.00am service
Sunday 8th March 2015
HC at St Stephen's.
Lent 3

John Beauchamp

Readings:
Romans 5.1-11,
John 4.5-42

In this morning's Gospel reading we are invited to travel to Samaria. To a hot and dry and dusty place. To a hillside just outside a small Samaritan town. It is mid-day and the sun is high in the sky. It is hot, very hot. As we focus in on the hillside we see that there is a round stone construction about a metre high and sitting beside it is a man. He is dressed in traditional Arab clothes with his head covered to protect him from the sun. No one else is around and all is quiet in the stifling heat. But then there is a sound and a distant movement as into the picture trudges a second person, a woman. She is bent over as she carries her water jar on her shoulder. As she approaches the well and as we edge nearer we can hear that a conversation begins between the woman and the man.

This is an extraordinary moment. An extraordinary moment in the Gospel story, an extraordinary moment in the story of salvation. An extraordinary moment in which these two seemingly small people on a distant hillside 2,000 years ago open a door that is still open for us today. And the key to understanding how extraordinary this moment is, is in understanding who these two people are.

The man of course is Jesus. He is the one that John the Evangelist has described in chapter 1 of his Gospel as the Word made flesh. He is the one that John the Baptist describes as the lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world. He is the embodiment of the very nature, the power, the compassion, the love of God. He is the Word through whom all things were made. He is the one who is full of grace and truth.

The woman on the other hand is a very different character. Yes of course she is a Samaritan, which made her a person regarded regionally as dubious and indeed second class. Yes, as well as a Samaritan she is also a woman which, in the culture of the day, meant that she had very few rights and would find herself regarded as more of a possession or a commodity than a person for much of her life. But despite these accidents of birth putting her at a disadvantage, there is more about this woman that we need to know. She has come to draw at the 6th hour, at mid-day. She has come to draw water at the height of the burning heat of the day and she has come on her own. No one does that! No, the only reason that anyone would go to draw water at mid-day is to be sure that they would avoid meeting anyone else. All the other women would have gone to the well together in the cool of the early morning and again in the cool of the evening, but this woman is clearly desperate to avoid the other townswomen. She is an outcast, not just because she is a Samaritan or a woman, but because her own community has rejected her as well. Of course we get a clue as to the possible reason for her furtive mid-day trip to the well a little later, as Jesus says, she has had 5 husbands and her current man is not her husband. She is, to put it politely, possibly very generous with her favours!

And so the scene is set. Jesus full of grace and truth meets the loose woman of the town. A woman for whom no doubt sex is a driving desire in her life and who has left many a marriage and relationship in tatters behind her.

By every Jewish criteria of the time this woman is undeserving. Undeserving of attention, undeserving of any conversation, undeserving of any generosity or compassion, and without a doubt, undeserving of salvation. So, from his very first word to this woman, Jesus is breaking all the rules, he is blasting a massive hole in the wall of accepted convention, he is tearing up the rule book and

leaving it in tatters on the ground! Despite her history, despite her reputation, despite her actions, Jesus offers this woman the water of life, the possibility of change, the gift of salvation.

As I said, this is an extraordinary moment! Extraordinary both for this woman and for us, because this is the moment at which we are included in the Gospel. This is the moment at which the grace of God in Jesus Christ is extended to us, to you and me, to all who are the outsiders or the Gentiles as the Jews would refer to us. For we are all this Samaritan woman. We are all outcasts, we are all unworthy, we are all sinners, we all deserve nothing but God's condemnation and wrath for, as Paul tells us: We have all sinned and fall short of the glory of God!

But, a very big but, a Gospel but!

But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him!

But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him!

At the heart of the Gospel is just one driving motive, and that of course is love, God's love. His love for the world, his love for humankind, his love for us and his love for me and you. As the bible's most well-known verse says:

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

But what we have to understand about God's love is that it is not a collective love but an individual love. It is not a love of humankind as a species but it is a love of human beings as individuals, as people that he knows by name. We are not told this Samaritan woman's name but there is no doubt that Jesus knew it. He knew her name just as he knows your name. He knew her story, her failings and foolishness just as he knows your story, your failings and your foolishness. And he offered to her the water of life just as he offers you the water of life. The water that quenches the thirst we all have, the thirst for wholeness and fulfilment and healing and happiness and peace that we all have in our own lives.

Paul tells us that it was when we were still sinners that God showed us the full depth of his love for us as Christ died for us. It was when we were still far off that Christ opened his arms on the cross in welcome to each one of us. But the extraordinary thing that we really need to understand about all of this is that Christ did not die for us, rather he died for you and for me. He died for you and for me, for each of us as individuals. He died to save you, and the extraordinary depth of his love for you is in this thought. If you, yes you, were the only person that he could have saved, Jesus would still have walked the way of the cross and suffered the unspeakable agony of crucifixion. He would still have done all of this and done it just for you! That is how much he loves you. That is how precious you are to him, for: it was while you were still a sinner that Christ died for you. And if that is true for you then it is of course true for the person next to you. It is true for the people on the pew in front of you, for the person passing by Saint Stephen's right now, for your neighbour, for all who visit the Manna, all the young people who frequent Urban Hope. If this is true for you, then it is true for all people each of whom are individuals that God knows by name and loves by name and Christ died to save!

This is what lies at the heart of the gospel, God's unconditional love. God's love for all people as individuals. No matter what their story is, no matter what their past or present, no matter what their reputation may be, God still loves and continues to love, even though that love may be expressed in his tears of grief and sadness at the hurt and pain and injury that we all manage to inflict upon others

as we struggle to pick our way through the twists and turns and ups and downs of our own journey of life.

This is what I believe lies at the heart of the gospel, and this is what attracted me to Saint Stephen's, because, as I read the parish profile, back in the early autumn of last year, I felt I was reading about a church community that really does try to express this belief in both its life as a gathered people and its ministry to the wider community. I felt that I was reading about a Christian community that was prepared to welcome the outcast, befriend the rejected and embrace the unloved. A community that was prepared to Join Jesus as we see him in this passage from John 4, on the edge, in the margins, in a risky place, breaking down barriers and tearing up the rule book as he offers this Samaritan woman, despite her reputation and past, the water of life.

And I have to say that as I read I got excited. Excited by the prospect of the possibility of becoming part of this community. A community that truly values and welcomes diversity and difference. A community that really does see everyone as an individual loved by God and so deserving of our love and care as well. And somehow, and I'm not so sure quite how, here we are! Natalie, myself and Nelson, transported from the quiet and peace of rather sleepy rural north Suffolk to Islington, to one of the most diverse, cosmopolitan, affluent and deprived places in the country. But as we swap the sound of tractors and combine harvesters for the sound of sirens and traffic and helicopters, we are excited! Excited by the prospect of seeking God in this place. Excited by all the possibilities that there are here to share love and care for the marginalised In society. Excited at the challenge of preaching the Gospel beyond these walls and seeing this community grow in commitment and service and faith and yes, in numbers too!

But, another big but! But there is one abiding and over-riding truth that we must all understand if we are going to see God's new blessing poured out on Saint Stephen's. A truth on which we need to build every aspect of our life as a Christian community. A truth without which we become no more than a group of people queuing at a supermarket checkout or sitting together watching a film or listening to a concert. And that is the truth of God's love. God loves you, he loves you with an everlasting love. He loves you as an individual and in Jesus Christ he died for you as an individual as well. But if that is true then it means that he loves the person sitting next to you as well. He loves the person sitting on the opposite side of the church as well. Dare I say, God loves the person here that you like the least! Christ died for the person here that you like the least! And if we can build our community on that understanding then we will truly build a community that can welcome the outcast, the rejected and the unloved with the loving embrace of our loving heavenly father.

Clearly none of us are Jesus. As we see Jesus offering the fullness of his love to this woman by an ancient middle eastern well we know that none of us can ever love with the perfect love that Jesus shows to her and to all of us. The love we express will always be imperfect, our desire may be to love, but we will inevitably end up hurting each other as well, and that goes for me as well! But if our heart-felt desire is to love as Christ loves us and our heart-felt desire is to seek healing and reconciliation when we fail to love each other in this way, then maybe we stand a chance, in some small measure, of bringing the love of Christ to others. The love that we see bear it's fruit on this Samaritan hillside as the loose woman of the town, whose ill-repute is known by all, leaves her water jar by the well and rushes back into the town calling everyone to 'come and see a person who told me everything about myself!'

In a moment we will share the peace together. It is a moment in the service that so easily just becomes a much needed break, a time to stand up and move around a bit after a long sermon! A time to briefly catch up with friends or greet those who got here a bit late and are sitting at the back! It should though of course be far more than this. It should be a moment of healing, a moment of reconciliation, a moment to break down the barriers that we inevitably end up building as we rub against each other in the everyday stuff of our church and personal lives. So let me end by challenging you this morning to make the peace a significant moment. A significant moment of preparation for receiving Communion. A significant moment of healing and reconciliation. A

significant moment of preparation for the experience of the fullness of his love that God offers you this morning in and through his son Jesus Christ who loves you with his unconditional and everlasting love just as he loves each of us, here and beyond with his unconditional and everlasting love.

You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the unGodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him!

Let us pray:

Lord our God,
Your unconditional love is overwhelming,
Your compassion and grace towards us is beyond our words.
May your Holy Spirit challenge and inspire us to be a community of grace.
A community in which your love breaks down the barriers we so easily create.
A community that is able to come to your table reconciled as we stand together on the foundation of your love.
That the water of life may flow in this place in abundance and all who enter may be able to drink and live;
Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.