

Jesus and the Samaritan Woman

Living Well and Living Well, Christchurch Epsom Church Weekend, June 2015

Horsley Park near Guildford KT24 6DT, 10 am.

One of the privileges of being a bishop is the opportunity to meet with confirmation candidates a little while before the service is due to begin. After introducing ourselves, I have a standard question that I put to each candidate, and the question is this: 'What has brought you to the point of publicly affirming your faith today?' Yet to this one simple question, there is an almost endless variety of answers.

Some are very ordinary, though none the worse for that – 'I've been coming along to church for five years, and I just felt it was time to stand up and be counted'. Some are very extraordinary. I think of a big, burly furniture remover, for example, who prayed for healing from a large lump on an embarrassing part of his body as he lifted a large Bible into his removals van, and who was healed by the following morning: 'Blimey!', was his response, 'I'd better start going to church!'. But whatever the answers to my question, I always come away from those meetings both encouraged and inspired. As we hear the story of each other's 'Pilgrim's Progress', whether dramatic or not, there is always a sense that 'the place on which we are standing is holy ground'.

So imagine if in a few months time I was to come back to Christchurch Epsom – and imagine if among your confirmation candidates were the two characters we read about in John chapter 3 and John chapter 4 – Nicodemus and the Samaritan Woman – and imagine if I were to put to them my standard question, 'What has brought you to the point of publicly affirming your faith today?'; well, how would they respond?

Both would say that they'd met with Jesus, one at the dead of night, the other in the heat of the day. Both would say that those meetings had been quite challenging, as Jesus had resisted all small talk, and had instead got right to the heart of their struggles and their spiritual searching. Both would talk about water: Nicodemus mentioning Jesus' phrase about being 'born of water and the Spirit'; the Samaritan woman remembering another phrase about a 'spring of living water welling up to eternal life'. Both would say that the meeting had changed their lives. But there the similarities would end.

The truth is, you see, that John could hardly have chosen two more contrasting characters to meet with Jesus than Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman. To start with the blindingly obvious,

- One was a man, the other a woman;
- One was a Jew, the other a Samaritan;
- One was a highly educated teacher, the other a simple villager;
- One was a Pharisee who obeyed the Jewish law to the letter, the other a five-time divorcee now living with man number 6.
- One was a member of the Jewish Parliament, the other a person with no influence other than the force of her personality.

- One was a person of faultless reputation, the other of a person of dubious reputation.

Yet both needed Jesus.

Why did Nicodemus come to Jesus at the dead of night? Presumably for fear that his reputation might be tarnished by too close an identification with this young firebrand from Galilee. Why did the woman come to Jesus in the heat of the day? Presumably so as to avoid contact with her disapproving neighbours, none of whom would be collecting water at quite such an exhausting time. And while it's true that the Samaritan woman must have had something about her to have attracted the attention of five husbands – and while it's also true that one of the main grounds for divorce in those days was childlessness, and it's possible that her complicated marital history had as much to do with infertility as anything else – there's no question that a Jewish rabbi like Jesus would have generally treated the likes of Nicodemus with the greatest respect, while keeping the likes of the Samaritan woman very firmly at arm's length.

The story in John 4 is all the more amazing when we realise just how much Jews and Samaritans traditionally hated each other. Nearly a thousand years before the time of Jesus, the Jewish nation had been split in two, with two of the tribes remaining in Judah, the southern kingdom, and the other ten developing their own identity in Israel or Samaria, the Northern Kingdom. Then the Northern Kingdom had been invaded by the Assyrians, who had carted most of those Northern Jews into exile, and had replaced them with a mixture of races, each with their own religious culture: so that the Samaritans were far from kosher when it came to matters of faith or holiness.

500 years before the time of Jesus, the Samaritans had opposed the rebuilding of the Jerusalem Temple under Ezra and Nehemiah. They'd even built their own temple on one of the Samaritan mountains, Mount Gerizim, to rival the one in Jerusalem. – a building which was then destroyed by the Southern Jews in 129 BC. So if you were living in Galilee, as Jesus was – and if you wanted to travel down to Jerusalem for one of the big religious festivals, as Jesus did – you had a tough choice before you. Either you could go the long way round, avoiding Samaria – a journey that took 6 days, but involved little hassle; or else you could set your SatNav to take you the most direct route, slap bang through the middle of Samaria – a journey that took 3 days, but could involve a whole lot of hassle. Jewish pilgrims were regularly abused, shunned, even stoned as they braved the journey; yet it was to a Samaritan – and not only that, but to a Samaritan woman who'd already made her way through five husbands and was now living with man number 6 – that Jesus spoke words of grace and truth, of forgiveness and eternal life. It's no wonder that the woman brought her whole village along to meet him, so becoming the first evangelist among the Samaritan people.

And as we think of Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman and their encounters with Jesus – and as we remember the theme of living water that lies at the heart of those

encounters – and as we seek to relate these stories to that little strapline you have as a church, ‘Living Well’ - I’d like us to imagine a river flowing right through the centre of this room, the living water of God’s grace: And I’d like you to imagine two sides to this river: that the people sitting here are on the legalistic side – don’t take it personally: you’re the ones who like to obey the rules, to live by the book, and to look down on other people who’ve made rather a mess of their lives – you’re the Nicodemus’; while the people sitting here are on the lawless side – and again don’t take it personally: you’re the ones whom the legalists look down on – those caught up in what the Bible describes as ‘wild living’ – you’re the Samaritan women.

There is a bridge over this imaginary river, and there are people on the bridge. Some are crossing from the legalist side to the lawless side. Perhaps they’ve been brought up in strict religious homes, and have come to believe that the people on the other bank of the river are having a lot more fun than they are; so now perhaps it’s time for a serious mid-life crisis. They’re getting drunk every night, they’re sleeping with whoever they like, life’s just one long party.

And meanwhile others are crossing from the lawless side of the river to the legalistic one. They’re tired of getting drunk every night and the addictions that seem to have taken hold as a result; they’ve tried sleeping with whoever they like, and it’s become empty and unsatisfying. They need to get themselves detoxified, sorted out. Perhaps a life of strict discipline, of abstinence, is what is really called for.

So what happens when these people cross the river? Well, it usually doesn’t work very well. For those who cross from the legalistic side to the lawless one, there is something called a guilty conscience that stops them from enjoying themselves very much – when, for example, did you last meet a contented adulterer?; while for those who cross from the lawless side to the legalistic one, they quickly find that they’re not really welcome: that like the Samaritan woman in our story they don’t quite belong, they’re not ‘one of us’. Perhaps that’s the reason why there are some people whose lives seem to consist of crossing from one side of the river to the other – always restless, never finding their way home.

But these chapters of John teach us that there’s a river that flows between the two banks – the living waters of God’s grace – and Jesus stands in that river, inviting people to come right in. He welcomes those on the legalistic bank; and he welcomes those on the lawless bank, because both need Jesus. All are invited to meet with God their Heavenly Father, and to know themselves loved, healed, restored, forgiven. All are called to put away their self-righteousness or self-indulgence, and to experience a new life of love and humility and purity and heart-felt gratitude.

From childhood I’ve been intrigued by the word ‘light’ – and by the way that the word ‘light’ is the opposite of two other words: the word ‘heavy’ and the word ‘dark’; and now I realise that there’s something rather significant about that. For the light of Christ – the light that sparkles over the living water of God’s grace - is the opposite of both the heaviness of legalism and the darkness of lawlessness. God’s

grace reaches out to both, and there's a party in heaven, Jesus teaches, every time someone jumps in.

That makes for an odd assortment of people in the river, of course: Nicodemus' mixing with Samaritan women, prodigals with goody-goodies. Secretly, perhaps, the ex-legalists are a little bit jealous of the ex-lawless because they'd love to have an exciting story to share - 'I was a violent, depraved drug addict before Jesus rescued me!' - and their own testimony - 'I used to chew gum during evensong' - seems rather dull by comparison. Secretly too the ex-lawless wish that they had the discipline and the Bible knowledge of their ex-legalist brothers and sisters. But in Jesus' grace the Nicodemus' and the Samaritans, the prodigal sons and the older brothers learn to splash along together, rejoicing in both the freedom and the calling of God on their lives.

Perhaps we could push the image a little further still: for somewhere along the course of our Christian lives, each one of us will be tempted to swim back towards one bank or the other.

If we used to be legalists, our temptation will usually be to swim back towards the legalistic side: that's what happens when I start losing touch with God's grace. I become proud and arrogant and judgemental - because that's the kind of person I was before I immersed myself in Him.

If we used to be lawless before we became Christians, our temptation will be to swim back to the lawless side: that's what happened to a teenager I knew in London - a young man called Evan - who used to rob people before he became a Christian. Four months after his conversion I heard that he'd robbed a betting shop. 'Is it possible to become a Christian and to rob betting shops?' was my question as I went to visit him in prison. But then I realised it: that when we drift away from God, we go back to the kind of lifestyle we lived before. For me, that meant pride and judgmentalism; for Evan, it meant robbing betting shops!

And it's not that there are two classes of Christians here - those in the middle of the river and those who are swimming back to one of the banks. It's rather that any one of us can drift away from the middle for a while, and the Jesus of John chapters 3 and 4 would call us back: back to knowing life in all its fullness, a life free from the pressures of endless self-justification on the one hand or self-harm on the other.

I've got a little carried away with my image: but here's a simple response to the story in our Gospel reading this morning: 'Sir, give me this water always'. It's the same response as in that ancient Christian hymn, 'Veni Creator Spiritus', 'Come Creator Spirit', or in its variant in the ancient prayer, 'Come Holy Spirit'. It's the same response as in one of my favourite hymns, 'Come down O love divine'. It's a response that recognises our daily need for the living water that Christ has come to bring. It's a response that recognises that Christchurch is indeed Christ's Church - and that if you're to fulfil the vision of being a Living Well in the Epsom community - and of calling your parishioners to live well, in harmony with themselves, with one

another and with the God who created and redeemed them – you will need not just social projects or mission strategies, but fresh supplies of Christ’s Spirit day by day, the living water pouring into you that it might overflow into the community around you.

And perhaps I could finish with some words from Malcolm Muggeridge, whom many of us will remember – a journalist, author and television presenter. For towards the end of his long life Malcolm Muggeridge wrote these words:

"I may, I suppose pass for being a relatively successful man. People occasionally stare at me in the streets – that's fame. I can fairly easily earn enough to qualify for admission to the higher slopes of the Inland Revenue – that's success. Furnished with money and a little fame, even the elderly, if they care to, may partake of trendy diversions – that's pleasure. It might happen once in a while that something I said or wrote [made] a serious impact on our time – that's fulfilment. Yet I say to you, and I beg you to believe me, multiply these tiny triumphs by a million, add them all together, and they are nothing – less than nothing, a positive impediment – measured against one draught of that living water Christ offers to the spiritually thirsty, irrespective of who or what they are."

Amen.