

## Third Sunday of Lent – YrA – 12 March 2023

### *Message – Goodnews that crosses all boundaries*

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Source of All Being, Eternal Word, and Holy Spirit, open our hearts and minds to receive the living water. **Amen.**

It would be hard to create two more contrasting characters. Last week we had Nicodemus, a man, a Jew, a ruler, this week it is the woman at the well, unnamed, a woman, a Samaritan, a moral outcast. Both engage with Jesus; both need the gift of new life that Christ the Eternal Word offers.

Where last week we had three partial passages and this week's lent study's biblical story was just the first part of today's gospel, this week's reading is very obviously a carefully crafted complete literary unit. Hallelujah! A range of themes come to the surface within it but the importance of the passage is to be seen in the last four verses. The gospel did not just come to the Jews, it came to those with whom they were at enmity too, the Samaritans, the remnant of the Northern Kingdom of Israel.

As well as bridging ethnicities, the narrative shows Jesus bridging the social divide between genders, perhaps it reminds us of Jesus's friendship with Mary and Martha. Implicit in the woman arriving at the well alone at the heat of the day is also that she is a social outcast. Jesus would have been well aware of this and was at ease breaking any social taboos involved.

As with many passages, there is some significant context behind it. John the evangelist was writing for a church that contained both Jews and Samaritans. The dialogue is therefore one that

was alive within the church for whom he was writing. Some of its members may well have expressed these very arguments.

It seems John is carefully navigating a way through the tensions between the two ethnic groups. The Samaritans hold that the Pentateuch is the only authoritative scriptures, the writings of all the Southern prophets have no authority. John keeps his Jewish readers onboard, by acknowledging that 'salvation comes from the Jews' but then creates unassailable unity saying 'the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem.'

As you may know, the reference to five husbands may not be a literal reference. In the second book of Kings, the Assyrian King is recorded as resettling the northern kingdom of Israel with people from five lands who continued to worship their five different gods. These may be the five husbands, what the Jews saw as an inauthentic expression of the covenant with Yahweh being their current partner and no husband at all.

Jews and Samaritans have slightly different versions of the Pentateuch. Jews record the first place where religious ceremonies took place in the promised land as Mount Ebal, while Samaritans record it as Mount Gerizim. Biblical archaeologists today are as confident as they can be that Mount Gerizim was the original reading. This was and is the place Samaritans worship even today.

Tensions emerged between the Jews and Samaritans when the Samaritans built a temple there, in competition with the Jerusalem temple. The tensions deepened when the Jews destroyed it two centuries later.

While we may be tempted to raise our eyes to heaven at the division between the Jews and Samaritans, we cannot help but be conscious of many similar divisions that one might almost say characterise the church. In one of my dictionaries, I have a wonderful double page spread of the family tree of Christian denominations, it is an extensive family tree!

We appear to have used Jesus's words 'the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth' as a call to division. We all have our own version of 'in spirit and truth.' We seem unable to, or perhaps lack the humility to, recognise that our worldview is always partial, in both senses of the word: incomplete and biased.

It is encouraging that today people move more freely between denominations. Their priority is to worship with a church that meets their need at this age and stage of their life. We see it as consumerist but it is also a sign of active engagement with faith.

There are models of faith as a stages, James Fowler suggested six stages, seven if you include our starting point, far too many for most of us to remember. So, Scott Peck simplified it to four. While, in theory a church should be able to hold, help, and guide people at every stage, that is not reality. Most churches are good at moving people from one particular stage to the next but struggle to do that for more than one starting stage.

In the context of a small community based church, I wonder if a more holistic pattern is possible. A family where those who are more mature mentor those at earlier stages of the faith. A context in which, as family, it is alright to fulfil any of a wide variety of roles and still be accepted. Whether you conform,

rebel, or are the wise elder, you are accepted for who you are, as you are, and for all you have to offer and all you need.

I would like the cathedral to consciously try to hold people at every stage of faith but I know that we will have a dominant way of being. I suspect that most people here are, in Peck's terms, either sceptical-individual or mystical-communal, or more likely a mixture of the two. The problem with models is that reality is messy and in this case most of us are more mature in some aspects of our faith than others.

Nonetheless, we have each have a dominant approach to our faith and that in some way reflects our faith development. Recognising, that we are all at different stages, I feel at ease with people attending a church that fits for them, that builds them up and helps them grow. I am less at ease with churches that see a person as having 'fallen away' if they then attend a different church or even expresses their faith in other ways.

Having said all this, I hope that we can work towards being a church family that holds people of every stage of faith. In particular, a place where it is possible to be taking first steps, where no questions are considered stupid. In my experience, some of those innocent questions are some of the hardest to answer because they identify some of the areas of mystery, of awe, and of wonder in our faith, mystery, awe, and wonder, that through familiarity we can too easily cease to see.

Our style of liturgical worship is well suited to holding people at every stage of faith but there need to be support structures for everyone, whatever their stage of faith. Some of you will instantly spot that one priest cannot do that for everyone. This

means that support structures are necessarily the work of the whole community. It takes a whole community to grow a 'true worshiper'! I will try to play my part, my hope is that all of you will be watching for those whom you could support.

Many people feel that they couldn't do this; they don't have the training or any of the other things needed. We could look at the disciples and ask what training they had but, less flippantly, what is really needed is being prepared to share a little of our own story and mostly to listen with, curiosity and complete presence, giving others space to find faith for themselves with a bit of guidance from us and the Holy Spirit, in us and in them.

This diversity of stages of faith mean that different people may have different views and needs. As a community, at our heart, we model holding these differences together, seeing how we can meet the diverse needs of diverse people.

Sometimes differences are too great to hold together. The breaking point is different for each person and changes through life. If our focus is on worship and showing God's love to everyone, we will have a remarkable amount of unity. Nonetheless, there are in some areas irreconcilable differences in what we believe shows God's love.

Where such separation of churches seems the only option, we must do all we can to maintain links, remembering that we are still a part of the same heavenly family, all with our own partial view of the world and seeking to authentically follow the way of Christ. Amen. Amen.