

**Third Sunday in Lent
St Paul's Manuka – 19 March, 2017.**

Exodus 17: 1-7

Psalm 95

Romans 5: 1-11

John 4: 5-42

Today in our Gospel passage from the fourth chapter of St John, we have an example of someone who moved towards relationship with God, through a meeting with Jesus. We have the story of a woman who met Jesus and responded both to his presence and his leading. It is a remarkable story, not only because of this movement towards in stages which she made, but also because of the cultural and religious setting in which the incident is placed.

The woman was a Samaritan and Jesus was a Jewish man. So what you say. Well in the first century, Jewish men did not speak to unknown women and Jews had virtually no dealings at all with Samaritans. Religious differences between Jews and Samaritans were both serious and deep-rooted, dating back centuries. To the Jews the Samaritans were very suspect in purity. The Samaritans had erected a Temple on a mountain as a rival to the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem and the Samaritans had their own version of Pentateuch or the first five books of the Hebrew Scriptures. All this made relations between Jews and Samaritans strained. A Jew would not under normal circumstances speak to a Samaritan as this would incur ritual defilement. It was a great taboo.

Jesus, however, has none of this, speaks with the woman asking her the favour of a drink. Others would have thought this unthinkable but Jesus breaks the taboos and speaks. Jesus risks the accusation of ritual pollution and enters into conversation and relationship with a woman from another religion. In so doing he not only accepts the woman, but he also accepts where she is and what she is. It is the acceptance that Jesus gives her which allows her to move toward him and in so doing to grow in faith.

When the woman first speaks to Jesus she speaks with contempt and sarcasm, saying 'How is it that you a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?' Her whole attitude reflects that deeply felt antagonism between Jews and Samaritans. Despite this Jesus is keen to start a conversation and a relationship. He speaks to her about the gift of living water which he is able to offer. As is frequently the case in John's

Gospel the story and indeed the relationship between people moves forward by means of a misunderstanding. The woman speaks of the fact that he has no bucket and so points to the irony of how he will obtain water without it. She is speaking in the literal, just as Nicodemus did in our Gospel last week. Despite all this the relationship between Jesus and the woman has already changed. Now she refers to him by a term of respect. She calls him 'Sir', a title reserved for someone of importance or learning, like a rabbi. She calls him 'Sir' and not just 'Jew'.

Jesus replies to her, not scathingly, but with more gentle leading. He tells her that the living water he gives is such that those who drink it will never be thirsty again. The woman remains for the time being at the literal level and thinks that Jesus is offering her some sort of magic water which quenches thirst permanently. Despite this further misunderstanding, the relationship between them is deepening and she is already drinking of the living water Jesus promises and which she does not yet really understand. Despite the lack of understanding she is moving towards him, she is entering the relationship. Now she calls him a prophet, a status far beyond her original use of 'Jew' as an insult. 'You call yourself a prophet and yet you have no bucket'. Despite some misunderstanding she has moved towards Jesus and he has entered into relationship with her.

Even though she has moved she remains heavily tied to her own Samaritan beliefs. She continues the conversation by debating the issue of whether the correct place to worship God is on the mountain holy to the Samaritans or in Jerusalem, the Jewish holy place. Jesus doesn't argue the point. He accepts her as she is. Jesus doesn't try to defend the Jewish position, instead he transcends it and makes the statement that true worship is not tied to particular places, but instead rests on the sincerity of the worshipper. True worshippers will worship God in spirit and in truth. These are the people, Jesus says, the Father seeks to worship him.

This further revelation from Jesus prompts more movement in the woman and she now uses the term 'Messiah' which means Christ. She's moved a long way and now affirms the hope and faith in the Messiah. It is precisely at this point that Jesus proclaims himself the Messiah. 'I am he', he says. The Greek words here 'ego emi' are very emphatic, so emphatic that it has the force of saying he is divine – he is God.

Jesus has been aware all along of the woman's movement towards him in faith. She has moved from the contempt of calling him 'Jew', to the sarcastic respect of 'Sir', to the ironic respect of 'prophet', and finally to

the ultimate title of 'Messiah'. Jesus had been with her all the way in this conversation and now he chooses just the right moment to make the powerful and final revelation of himself – his divine status. The woman, for her part, is ready to hear it at this point, but if he had declared it at the beginning of the conversation she would have laughed and had even greater contempt of him. As it is the effect of Jesus revelation is remarkable. She goes to the city and tells all her friends and they come with her to see this person who claims to be the Messiah. The Gospel ends with the significant thought that a Samaritan, a woman of another religious faith, proclaims a Jew, to be the Saviour of the world. She has become a missionary. The revelation which Jesus is for all people transcends boundaries of race, gender and religion – the sort of boundaries that we human are so eager to erect. Other religious traditions may show us the Saviour of the world!

There's been a great deal of movement in these events between people and traditions. Jesus' leading was gentle but effective. Revelation and faith are strongly linked and the woman is led forward, but she didn't have to understand everything and indeed full understanding is not necessary in a journey of faith, nor is understanding in particular accepted ways necessary. Jesus words and actions have led her from fixing her contemptuous gaze on a thirsty Jew, to proclaiming the divine Messiah and Saviour of the world. Rational understanding had little to do with all of this. What was important was the gift of faith which Jesus gives to the woman as the living water of life. The woman has indeed drunk deeply of the living water which Jesus promises and it is from this meeting that water gushes up and spills over into the lives of others. Faith was not so much taught but caught and so Jesus was proclaimed.

On our Lenten journey we need to be willing to move on and be moved on. We need to be willing to enter into closer relationship with Jesus by accepting the gift of faith and knowing the Lord. It is the willingness to drink deeply of the living water Jesus offers which brings God's love and power flowing into our lives through the grace Jesus brings. This story is not just about Jesus at some well long ago nor some woman, but about Jesus here right now and you and me right here and now. To listen to what God is saying to us through Jesus and the Holy Spirit, this very Lent, is to drink, to move forward, to enter in with a listening spirit. Full understanding is not required. God accepts us as we are and leads us on from there – gifting us with faith and filling us with grace. Like the Samaritan woman, we are called to enter in to relationship with Jesus, to know and trust him and to make ourselves open to the gift of faith.

May we walk on with Jesus, meet him at the well of life and drink deeply of the water only Jesus can supply. This may involve the breaking down of some of the barriers we erect for ourselves. May we look ahead with open hearts and minds to the new life of Easter and know the power of Christ risen within us, changing us and growing us into new life.