

Sermon for 3rd Sunday of Lent, Ross Jesmont

John 4: 5-42

There has rightly been much talk this week about 'social distancing'. We have been repeatedly informed that reducing contact with other people is one way in which we can help combat the spread of the Coronavirus. It is with some irony then that today's Gospel focuses on a Samaritan Woman who appears to be trying to keep a distance between herself and other people. This woman walks alone to the well in the middle of the day. The difference is that this woman is not keeping her distance to help stop the spread of disease, but because of social stigmas. She has been outcast and othered by a type of oppositional thinking that underlines many of the conflicts and divisions that we experience in our world today.

When you were children some of you might have played the game of opposites, where a word or image is shared, and you have to say a word that means the opposite. For example, if I said 'tall' you could say...'short'; if I said 'big' you could say...'little'; if I said 'up' you could say...'down'. As our language skills develop, we begin to speak about the world in more complex ways. However, as adults, many of us continue to think about the world in terms of opposites: good and evil, deserving and undeserving; us and them. It is because of this way of thinking that wars are fought, walls are built, and resources stockpiled. By contrast, in our Gospel we find Jesus willing to cross boundaries in order to ask for a drink of water.

Our reading begins with Jesus and his disciples journeying through Samaria on their way back to the Galilee. This is significant because some Jews regarded the Samaritans as foreigners and their attitude was often hostile towards them; this is despite the fact that Jews and Samaritans share many of the same beliefs. The division between the two communities began over the question of where God should be worshipped. According to the Jews the holy mountain was Mount Zion in Jerusalem, but according to the Samaritans it was Mount Gerizim in Samaria. Over time this theological disagreement led to a growing animosity between the two communities; so much so, that when Jesus told a parable about a "Good Samaritan" it caught his Jewish audience off guard.

Resting on their journey, Jesus sits by Jacob's well while his disciples go to buy food. It is at this time that the Samaritan woman arrives at the well to draw water. Jesus asks her for a drink and the woman is taken aback by his request: "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" In asking the Samaritan woman for a drink, Jesus was not only crossing the cultural boundary between Jews and Samaritans but the social one between men and women. It was not only that Jews did not speak to Samaritans but that men did not speak to women. Ignoring both these taboos, Jesus continues to engage the Samaritan woman in conversation.

By choosing to fetch water from the well around noon, we can assume that the Samaritan woman had little interest in running into anyone; around noon, is the time when the sun is at its highest and hottest. It was at this time that most people were sheltering in the cool of their houses. We get some hint of why this woman might have chosen to journey to the well at this time — the man with whom she is living is not her husband — but in her encounter with Jesus he never speaks to her about sin or forgiveness. Instead he asks her for water and in return offers her the water of eternal life.

What is striking about this encounter is that it is Jesus who initiates it. By asking for a drink, Jesus broke established customs and social taboos. Throughout the Gospels we

repeatedly find Jesus breaking rules, crossing boundaries, and dismissing social customs. In fact, it seems that he had a certain fondness for overstepping boundaries. He ate with sinners and tax collectors, ministered to the disposed and despised, and called the lost and the least to join him in the Kingdom of God. It was this willingness to play fast and loose with established social and cultural norms that led the religious authorities to conspire against him. However, in Jesus' willingness to overturn established norms, we encounter the God who does not conform to our human expectations. This begs the question: what rules Jesus might have to break in order to speak with us; what social conventions might he need to disregard in order for us to hear him? For the Samaritan woman it was the seemingly simple act of asking for a drink of water.

In asking the Samaritan woman for a drink, Jesus gives her the opportunity to recognize the face of the Christ in a stranger. But she does not begin to recognize who Jesus is until he reveals that he knows everything about her: "Sir, I see that you are a prophet." In response Jesus invites her to look again. It is not until they begin to talk about the coming Messiah that the Samaritan woman comes to the sudden realization that the man with whom she is speaking is he. Leaving her water-jar by the well the Samaritan woman rushes back into the city: "Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?"

When walking to the well around noon, the Samaritan woman did not expect to meet with anyone. In fact, she probably hoped that she would not. In her social isolation she certainly did not expect that she would encounter Jesus; the one who would transform her life through the seemingly mundane act of asking for a drink.

Hear then the good news: in Jesus we encounter the God who comes to us in often surprising and unexpected ways; the God who is not bound by place or social customs; the God who speaks to us even when we do not recognize him. In Jesus we encounter the God who meets us where we are and who offers us the waters of eternal life. So, come you who are thirsty, come and encounter the savior of the world. Amen.