

## **Year A Lent 3**

Exodus 17: 1-7

Romans 5: 1-11

John 4: 5-42

### **Scandal!**

There is more than a hint of scandal in today's readings.

In our reading from Exodus, the grumbling, quarrelsome Israelites had lost faith in Moses as their leader and also, by extension, in the God who had led them out of captivity. And yet God, full of compassion and mercy, whose patience was shown to be far greater than Moses, gave the people water to drink. Despite testing the LORD, the people were given life through water that gushed from the rock of Horeb.

In our reading from Romans chapter 5, verse 6 states that Christ 'died for the ungodly'. Paul Tillich rephrased this as, 'While we were still unacceptable, Christ accepted us.' God had demonstrated God's love for all of humankind in the most costly way. In verse seven St Paul rightly asserts that, 'Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person some might possibly dare to die.' This focusses on the uncomfortable truth of our flawed human nature: that we don't count all lives as equal; only some are worth dying for. Who do we think are 'good', or 'righteous'? I wonder whose life we think is and isn't worth saving?

The scandal of God's love is that God saves the people that consensus says are unworthy of saving alongside those our society deems worthy of saving.

Paul's aim isn't to make us feel guilty – a moral emotion we experience when we believe or realise (accurately or not) that we

have compromised our own moral standards or those of our faith. Paul's message is a declaration of hope; hope that tells us that there is nothing we can do to exclude ourselves from the love of God. Verse ten reminds us that as enemies of God we were reconciled to God through the death of our Saviour, and having been reconciled we shall be saved by his life, liberated as God's friends through the resurrected life of Christ.

And then we come to our gospel reading today. It is appropriate and timely that it comes four days after International Women's Day on 8<sup>th</sup> March. A day marked since 1911; a global celebration of the social, economic, cultural and political achievements of women.

The story of the woman at the well is very familiar to us, and for that very reason we can be forgiven for not hearing it with a fresh mind and hearing the power of this narrative. The narrative between Jesus and the unnamed woman is the longest in the New Testament; yes, longer than any narrative between Jesus and his disciples. So John must have seen this interaction as a critically important stage in Jesus' mission and ministry.

The Samaritan woman has an undeserved reputation for being promiscuous, and yet when I read through the gospel reading this week, there is actually no direct evidence for her having this reputation. Jesus never calls her a sinner or calls for her to sin no more, or pronounces her free from the bondage of unsavoury and life-limiting aspects of her life. Yes, she has had many husbands, but remember that a woman could not divorce a man, so it wasn't as if of her own volition she divorced one man and quickly moved on to another. To avoid being destitute and falling into a life of prostitution she may well have had to re-marry.

I contend that this story is not told so we can judge the morality of the woman. This story is not told so we can feel better because her life seems so chaotic and because she is not accepted by her

community. This rich and beautiful story is about Jesus revealing himself as the Messiah to a fellow human being:

- ✝ Revealed even to a woman – women were seen as unreliable witnesses, who should not be out of doors on their own
- ✝ Revealed even to a Samaritan – a people who had completely different understandings about how to live in faith, different understandings about God and where it was appropriate to worship.
- ✝ Revealed even to a person on the periphery of her community – someone who was probably not socially accepted by many in her community.

Yes, Jesus revealed himself to this Samaritan woman. She is the first person in John's gospel that Jesus reveals his true identity to.

Jesus saw something in this woman. Was it a spiritual hunger, an intelligent and inquiring mind, a strength and resilience, a gift for evangelism?

I think Jesus, who had the gift of sensing and evaluating the hearts and minds of all who he encountered, saw all of these and maybe many other gifts in this Samaritan woman.

Jesus did not see this human being, made in God's image and loved by God, as a Samaritan, as a woman, as an alien, a non-believer, a stranger or foreigner, or applying some other label that would create an 'us' and them' or 'other' status. Jesus lens saw with God's eyes, a child of God in front of him.

So, in this gospel reading we have the making of another scandal.

A Spiritual scandal perhaps?

For Jews, a Samaritan was the last person you should converse with, and most travellers would have avoided travelling through Samaria.

It begs the question for us; who is our equivalent of the Samaritan woman, the last person we would deem to be 'good', the last person we would ask a favour of?

Jesus' actions tear down so many human-made barriers and preconceptions.

Jesus' actions challenge us to dream of a different kind of social and religious order, to dream of different kind of kingdom, in fact to dream of God's kingdom.

Jesus' actions challenge us not to shame, castigate or condemn, but to listen, to value and make someone feel loved, not judged.

Jesus' actions challenge us as those trying our best to follow his way, to live in the truth that all people are made in God's image and are loved by God. To recognise our own ways of stereotyping people based on political, racial, sexual, cultural and economic identities and the prejudices inherent in our internal classifications; that we may dismantle the unhealthy boundaries between 'us' and 'them' that we all create in our minds.

Jesus challenges us to lead with vulnerability – he asked the woman for water. He did not lead from his own power and strength.

For Jesus this was an important time in his ministry. The woman became an effective evangelist. In her fervour, she forgot all about her water jar and rushed back to the town and persuaded many to come out of the town to meet Jesus. That in itself was a miracle; a woman on the periphery of her society was able to convey a message about the Messiah that was so compelling that she was able to get the people to come out of the town to meet Jesus. And Jesus' response? He stayed in that town for two days, underlying that this woman's words of witness were reliable and true. This action in itself no doubt helped the woman's reintegration into the town's community.

Today's readings speak of scandal; the scandal of God's love, grace and mercy being far more encompassing and enduring than anything humankind can imagine.

May we seek to follow Christ's example in our lives and offer scandalous love, compassion, grace and mercy to all we encounter, knowing as Paul said in Galatians, that in God's kingdom there is no Jew or Greek, no slave or free, no male or female. When we look into

the eyes of another human, may we see with Christ's eyes, and behold a child of God.