



Jesus and the Samaritan Woman

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Year A, Lent 3

Exodus 17:1-7; John 4:5-42

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We continue our journey with the gospel of John through Lent. He's leading us on a merry dance, providing us with gospel accounts populated by characters that, each week, stand in stark contrast to the other.

Last week we met Nicodemus. **Nicodemus** came to speak to Jesus at night; a man with power, educated, a Pharisee, a religious leader and teacher, an insider in the Jewish world. He doesn't understand what Jesus is saying, trying to teach him.

Today we meet the Samaritan woman. She remains nameless; she meets Jesus in the noon day heat; likely uneducated, she comes alone, at noon when no one else will be there because she's not part of the group, she's an outcast in her community; she's a Samaritan (there was much enmity between them and the Jews of Jesus' time). **Jesus** initiates the conversation. At first she doesn't understand what he means. But by the end of the story she's gathering her neighbours to hear this man. "He cannot be the Messiah can he?"

I smiled as I read today's extended gospel with its evident contrast to last week. One follows the other. Between them they upend any assumptions we might have of who actually has stature. Today's gospel is loaded with all sorts of significance in terms of gender, political and religious taboos being breached between this Jewish Jesus and this Samaritan woman, married 5 times and living in sin (or maybe love) with her not husband. We could explore with great interest such topics but what caught my attention was the apparent

miscommunication. I was reminded me of those conversations I used to have with my very concrete thinking son. I'd try to explain an idea or concept using a theoretical concrete example to do so. Only to find he would latch on to the example and explain in return, the logistical improbability of that happening, or seek to clarify exactly which sort of cow, or car, or house or whatever the concrete example happened to be as to whether it was even likely. Of course in the process the idea being explained got lost and the conversation completely side tracked.

There seem hints of this as the conversation between the Samaritan woman and Jesus proceeds. They appear to be talking past each other. The Samaritan woman interprets Jesus words quite literally, looking to the practical, the improbability of Jesus getting water without a bucket, the desirability of the scenario of not being thirsty or not having to come and draw water. Jesus in turn continues his train of thought/thinking/teaching oblivious it seems to me as a reader to the woman's incomprehension. Yet the conversation hangs together because there are enough threads of commonality between them for links to be made.

I find the woman's testimony curious. Jesus told her everything she's ever done. I'm not sure how, but evidently their conversation has caused her the relief of enlightened self-honesty such that she wants others to share in it, such that this could make him Messiah. Perhaps it's because Jesus sees her, knows her and meets her, all of her, all she's ever done. And she's accepted, acceptable, who she is, is means of knowing God and of God being known.

You'd think that once the disciples turn up and Jesus continues his dialogue that this time we'd get some connection - surely the disciples are on the same wavelength. Yet from the outset they're singularly incurious. I'm not sure **how** we know they're astonished that Jesus is speaking with a woman when we hear they're not **sufficiently** astonished to be bothered commenting on it. And then this Jesus

rather esoteric discourse met by concrete reality conversation that began with the Samaritan woman continues - now with the disciples.

When I consider today's gospel, I find myself disconcerted because the communication is so disjointed. Frustrated because Jesus doesn't seem to be listening to those he's speaking to and they don't seem able to hear him, or at least to understand what he's saying. I'm not sure who to identify with, the Samaritan woman and the disciples who are pretty concerned about victuals and how to get on in real life, or Jesus who's trying to communicate something deeper. It seems to me if you don't have your victuals sorted out you haven't the luxury of engaging in deeper meaning stuff.

And then, because no one in the story seems to hear and comprehend Jesus somewhat enigmatic dialogue - even the disciples who're meant to be the in crowd, closest to the action, with the inside running on comprehension. Then the onus of responsibility to **know** what it is Jesus is saying and **what it means** falls onto those of us listening or reading. To those of us who have wisdom of hindsight and distance of years. **We** know this is significant because it's in the bible and the words are uttered by **Jesus** who we **now** know is Son of God/Messiah. So we're hard put to dismiss this as random ranting, rather these Jesus words must be significance laden full of meaning.

So ... well, that makes it a whole bunch easier, **we're** the ones who're meant to know so of course we do. After all we're the discerning ones with length of years since this account to be able to see the universal thread, common wisdom, perhaps salient warning.

Yet, if we get caught in the either/or trap – either 'get it' or don't, identify either with outsider Samaritan or insider disciples, its either about concrete things or deeper meaning, we could become a little stuck at this point. Food and water, thirst and hunger, eating and drinking, worship and mountains, prophets and testimony, belief and spoken word, double meaning and nuanced wordplay populate this text.

Regardless of how we or whether we comprehend Jesus deeper meaning we're left in no doubt that this living water, true worshipper, food that fully satisfies faith venture is located in and concerned with the real life, full of needs and confusion of you and I. Of course we need be concerned with victuals, with the practicalities of life, with the concrete world in front of us but where does it lead if that is **all** we concern ourselves with?

I cannot confidently declare I know Jesus meaning in today's gospel. But maybe this gospel teaching can reassure - being faithful doesn't mean we have to know it all, to 'get' it as was illustrated in Nicodemus last week. Being faithful means remaining present even if, as the words of wisdom pour over us, more seem to wash off than be absorbed.

And of that discomfiting notion that everything we've ever done is known by God? Well, if the Samaritan woman's anything to go by, it means even so, despite everything that might reveal, in the eyes of God all of who we are is acceptable/accepted to God. And that it is **through** and **with all that means/implies** that we make God known. We hear Jesus urge "Look around," see **this** world is the place of God's bounty and fruitfulness, join God whose acting is the practicalities, the concreteness of the world and contribute to its flourishing.