

### Homily – 15-03-20 – Lent 3

Over the years certain Bible readings become so familiar they become like old friends. The parables of the Prodigal Son and The Good Samaritan are two examples from Luke's Gospel. These offer profound insights about the nature of God, and how God would have us respond to human need. I think the Gospel reading this week (John 4:5-42) is like an old friend who potentially surprises us because new things are going on in our lives since we last encountered it.

At face value it describes a conversation between Jesus and a nameless woman, but there are important layers of context to highlight before we consider what God might be saying to us through this reading. At the time the people group known as Samaritans were regarded as scum by the Jewish community to the degree that the two main schools of Rabbinic thinking debated whether or not God would judge you if you let a Samaritan drown if you saw them struggling in the water! So, it's reasonable to think that the disciples left Jesus outside the Samaritan city of Sychar to protect their teacher from being polluted by the 'scum' who lived in that city.

And women were regarded as less significant than men in the Jewish community of that time to the degree that a Jewish man was not supposed to speak to a woman in public, even if they were married! In our time there continue to be an Orthodox Jewish prayer for men which begins, "I thank you God that you did not make me a woman!"

Then there's the perplexing description of the woman coming alone to the well in the middle of the day and not early in the morning with the other women. We might wonder why she did this but as the conversation with Jesus unfolds it becomes clear. The woman had previously had five husbands and the man she was living with was not husband. Presumably the other women of that community would not have been kind in their critique, so it would have been easier to come alone in the middle of the day and rather than cope with unkind words early in the morning.

Bearing each of these things in mind it seems astonishing that Jesus initiated a public conversation with a person stigmatised by their community. Indeed, a woman from a community regarded as 'scum'! Despite this he asked her for a drink and a rich conversation unfolded between them.

Clearly it was a life-changing conversation for the woman, because she ended up going back to the community that had shunned her to tell them about Jesus. In verse twenty she is remembered saying, "Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah can he?" And she spoke so compellingly that those people went to meet with him for two days.

Last week I met together in Sydney with all the bishops in the Anglican Church of Australia and it was a good time of discussion and prayer. But as we talked it became clear that there continues to be deeply different understandings about the roles that women can have in the leadership of church communities. It has been twenty-eight years since women were first Ordained Priest in Australia; but, the richest and numerically largest Diocese in Australia still does not allow women to be Ordained priest and understands, that in the Church and in the family, women should not have leadership authority over men!

Strange to encounter in contemporary Australia a view of women that echoes something of the prejudiced view so familiar to Jesus in first century Palestine! But, it was uncomfortably real for the

seven women bishops who were part of the gathering last week, and for all others present who think that both women and men are called by God to exercise Ordained leadership in the Church. All bishops present are part of the Anglican Church of Australia this fundamental difference of belief and practice doesn't seem right. I wonder what you think?

It's challenging to think about the way that Jesus spoke to the woman at the well when he had good cultural and religious reasons not to. And, challenging to think about who we don't talk to, and what God might do both in us and them if we risked engaging in such a conversation.

This is not to suggest that such conversations are easy or straightforward. It takes courage to listen and potentially hear things we disagree with, or struggle with; and conversely it takes courage to speak truth to someone who intimidates us, or someone who has authority over us. But today's Gospel clearly suggests that new life and freedom come from such conversations. The woman ran back to her community and somehow the fear of rejection and ridicule had been put to one side. Instead, there was new confidence as she told people about the person she'd been talking to.

So, this week who might you and I reach out to for a life-giving conversation? It won't be when we go to collect water from a well because that's not part of how we live our lives, but, through a phone call, a private message on Messenger, or a face to face visit; who might we reach out to, trusting that God will be in the midst of that?

Let's pray...

Loving God, who meets us each day, we give thanks for our lives and for your love. Through your Spirit guide us this week as we reach out to people through conversation, and in your grace may this be a blessing. We pray in the name of the one who yarned with a woman collecting water long ago, Jesus the Christ. Amen