

May I speak in the name of God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

If you were here in church last week with us, you'll have heard me preaching about Jesus' conversation with the Pharisee called Nicodemus. The passage for today, that gospel we've just heard, is another one of these long dialogues from John's gospel, which is so characteristic of his gospel where Jesus meets someone and then has this long and involved series of questions and answers.

This is another one of those dialogues. It is interesting to note that this woman, this unnamed Samaritan woman who Jesus is talking with here is very, very different to the person of Nicodemus, who we were thinking about last week. Nicodemus was a man, this is clearly a woman. He was Jewish, this woman is Samaritan. Nicodemus was a powerful man. This woman who Jesus meets in our gospel of the day is on the margins of society. Two very different people, both of whom need Jesus.

To Nicodemus Jesus offered the possibility of new birth. To this Samaritan woman Jesus offers living water. I should say that this is one of my favorite parts of John's gospel. There's lots of John's gospels I don't quite click with, this passage I do. It's a story that over the years I've enjoyed praying with. I've prayed with it in what's called the Ignatian style, which is a style of prayer popularized by St. Ignatius in the 16th Century, which involved reading a gospel story and then letting one's imagination go a bit imagining the scene and seeing if one could enter into the story imaginatively and even be one of the characters that is in the story.

I want to offer you three things that came out of this passage whilst I was praying with it. The first is this, that Jesus takes the initiative in this story. Let me set the scene. Jesus and his disciples are going south from Judea to Galilee, which means they have to go through Samaria. The thing about Samaria is it's full of Samaritans. The Jews and the Samaritans have been feuding for about 400 years. Jesus stops at this well known well, Jacob's well. It's still there. It's about half a mile from the town of Sychar. Jesus was tired, it was hot, it was the middle of the day.

Jesus is there on his own because the disciples have gone off to the town to get lunch, but he's not on his own for long because this Samaritan woman comes to the well to get water. You have to wonder why she's there. There are wells in the town. She has walked on her own in the heat of the day to get some water. There must be a reason why she has done that. We find out as

the story progresses that she has a very complicated domestic arrangement. It's reasonable to suppose that this woman is perhaps, as I've said, on the margins, even an outcast, or maybe she just liked keeping herself to herself.

Anyway, she's probably surprised to find that there's already somebody at the well at the heat of the day, especially as she gets close, and to find out that it's a Jewish man. She no doubt feels a bit awkward because Jews don't associate with Samaritans, and Jewish men certainly aren't ever keen to be alone with a Samaritan woman. She's probably thinking, "Well I'll just sneak up, grab some water, and go." It wasn't that simple. Jesus took the initiative and spoke to her. He asks a question, they enter into conversation. In so doing, he reaches out and breaks down all the barriers that might've existed between them.

That's how it is. Jesus still reaches out to us, his people. If there are barriers between us and God, it wasn't God who put them there. In Jesus God reaches out and calls us. On Wednesday at the Christian Formation Evening we were thinking about the subject of reconciliation and that great mystery and wonder of how it is that we are saved by the cross. We were talking about how important it is to remember that God reaches out to us in Christ Jesus. He saves us, he takes the initiative. As it says in that reading that we've just heard from Romans, "Christ died for us whilst we were still sinners." Our salvation doesn't come when we reach a certain level of perfection, when we're good enough for a certain length of time. It's whilst we were still sinners that Christ dies for us. We are reconciled to God through Jesus. It's typical in this story, as in the whole gospel, Jesus takes the initiative and makes the first move.

Secondly, Jesus saw this woman as she really was. I got a flavor of this a couple of years ago. I had a very interesting experience in a pub. One of my friends organized a get together reunion for all our high school friends, so it was about 30 years after we'd first met. There were people there I hadn't seen for that length of time, one of whom was Victoria, who I was particularly friendly with when we were at school but I hadn't seen her since. When she walked into the pub I knew I wasn't seeing her as everybody else in the pub saw her. They might've seen a woman as old as me. We're obviously the same age walking in, but I didn't. When Vicky walked into the pub it was very peculiar. I saw her as an 18 year old. I saw her exactly as when I'd last seen her. I didn't notice, or I saw past, the wrinkles, the bags that inevitable accumulated over the years. I saw her for the fresh-faced girl I knew her to be.

I tell you this because when I was praying with this story and imagining myself in the scene I was sitting with it and seeing it through the eyes of the Samaritan woman. I felt Jesus was looking at me. I felt he was looking at me as I want to be seen, not as I really am. I felt Jesus look past the imperfections and saw the best of me. The New Testament talks about this as the effect of what Jesus has done for us on the cross. We are cleansed or justified, the word used in that Romans passage. We are justified by the blood he shed. His sacrifice makes us pure, so that when God looks at us he doesn't see the sin which clings to us. He sees us as made pure in Jesus.

In Hebrews it says, "Our hearts are sprinkled with his blood to cleanse us from a guilty conscience, and our bodies are washed with pure water." That's why St. Paul says, "In Christ Jesus there is no condemnation." The truth of this doctrine is set out in this story by the well. The Samaritan woman has made lots of bad choices, but as she sits down with Jesus and as Jesus looks at her, she could see the kindness in his eyes. He looked not with condemnation, but with love and understanding.

One of the things I'd like to leave you with this week is a challenge to read this story on your own. Do it as part of your Lenten discipline to read it slowly. It's a very vivid scene. Let the scene come to life in your imagination. Be seated by the well as if you were that woman. As you sit with it, ask that question: "How does Jesus look at me?".

The third and final thing I noticed about this passage was the offer of living water. Of course, it's good for us to pursue that living water that Jesus offers, but as I prayed with this passage I thought how much time I spend around stagnant water, which must be the opposite of the living water Jesus is talking about here. I realized that I've spent far too long fooling around in stagnant water. It's got a strange attraction. I'm drawn there, even though of course it does me no good. I know where the stagnant water is in my life. Where is it in yours? It could be in a relationship, an addiction. We've all got those puddles of stagnant water lying around somewhere. Whatever it is, let's resolve to leave it and seek the living water that Jesus offers.

Let's say with the Samaritan woman, "Jesus, give me this water." The Samaritan woman that we meet in this story seems much better able to grasp what Jesus was saying to her than Nicodemus was. We saw last week that Nicodemus couldn't get beyond the literal level, but this woman gets what Jesus is saying. When Jesus says to her, "The water that I will give will become a

spring of water, gushing up to eternal life", she doesn't say as Nicodemus might have said, "Well, how does the water get inside?". She simply says, "Give me this water". St. Paul knew what it was to have this living water. He describes it thus: "God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us." Jesus talked of gushing, Paul talks of pouring. The experience, the point, is the same.

We're not to be reservoirs of God's love. We're to be streams. The love that God pours into our hearts is to flow out to those around us. Let's pray with the Samaritan woman, "Jesus, give me this water so that I may never be thirsty again."