

Mission Council Bible Study – Tuesday 14th May 2019

Listening to God speaking to us – through each other (Jn. 4:7-30, 39-42)

This morning's painting shows afterwards. We are back at the well with this woman. Once again, in Köder's painting, she seems to be alone.

Yet everything has changed. She isn't alone. She never will be alone. She looks down and sees reflections. On the left she sees herself with a shawl over her head. It's how she looked on another day. It's a memory. And beside her, the one who changed the world. Köder gives us a painting about following Christ as we think, this morning, about listening to God speaking through each other.

I'm sure there will be a heresy connected to loving one of the gospels more than the others. But I've always fallen for John's Gospel most of all. Chapter 4 is one of the reasons.

This, of course, is the gospel giving Jesus cosmic context long before he steps into the map of human history: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God... All things came into being through him... to all who received him... he gave power to become children of God... And the Word became flesh and lived among us..." (1:1-14).

Nearing the end of the Gospel, John looks back and writes: "...these [signs] are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name." (20:31).

Responding to Jesus is key. He comes from the dawn of time to disrupt time. He comes to encounter us; throwing open possibilities beyond our dreams. He comes to shrink the enormity of God's creative and saving purposes down to a size we can grasp; making God small enough for us to meet. He comes to invite us into God's grace and mercy; to discover our true selves as God's beloved children. So it is that the Word through whom all things came into being sits, tired and thirsty, and watches through the heat haze as a lone woman walks to the well.

What might it mean for us to listen to God speaking through each other?

The most profound thing we might take from John 4 is also the most obvious. We can each bear witness to our own encounters with Christ; to the beautiful enormity of God saving us. We can each share our experiences of becoming the children of God.

We can each put ourselves into Köder's painting, looking down and seeing our reflection with Jesus beside us. We can each tell of what that means in our triumphs and tragedies. We can each speak of times when the presence of Christ has been comfort, and times when it has, perhaps, been all too elusive.

Our text ends with the power of this woman's witness: "He cannot be the Messiah, can he?" Many believe because of her testimony. Jesus stays two days. Out of the smallest of steps of faith a whole world can become reordered, transformed, shot through with the light of the glory of God: "...we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Saviour of the world." That title, when John wrote, was reserved for the Emperor in Rome. Truly, all is being made new!

Perhaps, today, we might ponder: How am I bearing witness to you to the love of God I have received in Christ? How am I hearing your witness?

If that's the big picture of John 4, maybe there are more evocative details.

Often in the gospels, people meeting Jesus come and go with very little record. Not so in John 4. This woman is wonderfully drawn. She is rich in personality, dives deep into a lively conversation, brings a complicated personal history and becomes a stunningly effective witness.

She is gloriously real. She is no caricature. And Jesus responds to her, from his opening "Give me a drink", as someone to truly meet. Jesus pays attention to her and she pays attention to him. And she discovers God.

Barbara Brown Taylor writes about meetings like this: "At its most basic level, the everyday practice of being with other people is the practice of loving neighbour as the self. More intricately, it is the practice of coming face-to-face with another human being, preferably someone different enough to qualify as a capital 'O' Other – and at least entertaining the possibility that this is one of the faces of God." (*An Altar in the World*, 2009).

Sometimes, just maybe, in the course of a long meeting like this one, we slip a little. Sisters and brothers become caricatures. They lose their multi-dimensional complexity, their bundle of hopes and dreams and sins and personal disasters, and just become annoying noise. Or maybe the opposite happens, and their contribution so chimes with everything we think that we no longer notice the question they have left behind, unanswered.

If we want to truly listen to God speaking through each other don't we have to truly pay attention to each other? Our understanding is that the Holy Spirit is going to shape the life of the URC through what you all say and listen to amongst each other today. That's a good thing, a fine prospect, a hopeful beginning, a high calling.

John unfolds a story of stereotypes shattering, of religious divisions healing, of arguments over scripture deescalated by the presence of the Word of God made flesh.

The Jewish rabbi already overturns prudence and respectability by travelling through Samaria. 2 Kings (17:24-41) describes this region as one of cultural and religious engineering. Having defeated the people of God, the King of Assyria resettles Samaria with refugees, migrants and hostages from Babylon and beyond. When it seems that God is displeased the King orders a captive priest from Israel to go and teach the faith. What emerges is a mixture of Israel's faith and other faiths. Whilst Samaritans identified themselves as the true Israel, Jews saw them as anything but. As Jesus wanders in, all the cultural and religious expectations of the day would say he's getting lost amidst unclean distant relatives. Not for nothing will Jesus place a Samaritan as the exemplar of faith in one of his great parables.

All this broken history, and gender politics, swirls around the well as Jesus asks his question and she responds, naming the multiple gulfs between them: "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?"

Jesus hints that he's far more than she might think he is. He's the gift-giver from God; the one who offers living water for anyone open enough to receive it.

"Living water" carries their conversation deep into theology. Often in the Hebrew scriptures it expresses God's gifts of life. Take Jeremiah 2:13: "...for my people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, the fountain of living water, and dug out cisterns for themselves, cracked cisterns that can hold no water."

In a land where lack of water was a daily risk and ever-present death sentence, living water expressed the sheer abundant goodness of God.

She brings some of this theological grandeur firmly down to earth by observing that Jesus is ill-equipped to offer her any water at all. He needs her to get a drink, not the other way around.

Then she picks up again on their broken, bitter, disrupted history. They meet on holy ground; at the well of Jacob, near the plot that Jacob gave to Joseph: "Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob...?" She knows her own story of faith. She believes. She's not going to be bested by this out-of-place Jew.

I think Jesus loved this conversation. I think he loved her. Now the encounter begins to turn towards salvation. There are, perhaps, two scenes to play out. The first begins to enlarge her understanding of the gift he has for her: "...a spring of water gushing up to eternal life."

A legend said that the well water overflowed all the time that Jacob was nearby. Jesus works with the reality of the place and all of its significance, to offer something far, far greater.

As we listen to each other, in what ways do we hear the generous flow of the water of life in our own lives? What might be constraining that flow, diverting it, damming it up and stifling it?

A second scene unfolds at Jacob's well. Jesus sees into her life. He lets her know it: "Go, call your husband, and come back."

She's collecting water alone, in the midday heat, because she's shunned by the community that collects water together, in the cool of the day. She's a multiple outsider. Her life is too complicated, too unclean, and too messy.

And Jesus loves her. The love of God, refusing that anyone can be too complicated, too unclean, too messy, refuses to push her away. In Jesus the barriers of centuries, the scars of sin, the fear of difference tumble and fall and flee away.

"Sir, I see that you are a prophet." Now she delves into theology. Jews and Samaritans deeply disagreed over scripture. Samaritans read Hebrew texts pointing to Mount Gerizim as the holy place and built their great temple there, against the Jewish focus upon Jerusalem. She tests Jesus with the age-old dispute. He refuses to let that dispute obscure the scale of salvation.

Listening to each other, we will hear many interpretations of scripture, many perspectives upon the pressing needs of the world and of the URC. That's our conciliar glory; our shared exercise of oversight. Maybe, as we stare with this woman down into the well, we discover a little more of what it is to seek, together, to know and obey the mind of Christ. It seems that Jesus holds to a bigger thought than the ancient disputes, sincerely enacted, between Jews and Samaritans. God's horizon invites us to look upwards and outwards in more hope and trust and delight than we might, at first, think possible. God's companions will include people we barely imagine being with. The more we listen for God, perhaps the more surprised we will become. How might that bless us today?

She's thirsty in a host of ways. She wants to drink deeply. John gives us, upon her lips, one of the great gospel moments of redemption: "I know that Messiah is coming. When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us."

Samaritans awaited a second Moses; the "Returning One". "I am he..." comes the revelation. Moses, from the burning bush, heard the mysterious name of God: "I am who I am." (Exodus 3:14a). The Samaritan woman, beside Jacob's well, meets God face to face.

Jesus has travelled with her, and she has travelled with him. They have sparred their way deeper and deeper into grace. Ephraim the Syrian died in 373AD. His commentary on this passage isn't the most up to date! But I think it still captures something of their journey: "At the beginning of the conversation he did

not make himself known to her, but first she caught sight of a thirsty man, then a Jew, then a Rabbi, afterwards a prophet, last of all the Messiah. She tried to get the better of the thirsty man, she showed dislike of the Jew, she heckled the Rabbi, she was swept off her feet by the prophet, and she adored the Christ.”

Last week one of the great followers of Jesus of our age, Jean Vanier, died. Amongst so much that he has left us are the l'Arche communities. He described them as: “...communities where people with disabilities and people who have chosen to be with them share our lives together in a spirit of communion and friendship.”

Vanier found, in the Gospel of John, deep treasures. It seems fitting to end with his words:

“And so it is that the Gospel of John has helped me to give meaning to the ‘foolishness’ of our lives. We need spirituality, spirit, priorities, motivation, and nourishment in order to live every day what appears to many as meaningless... It is never easy to be constantly close to people who are weak and in pain... Assistants in l'Arche soon discover their own limits, vulnerability, and weaknesses, the places of violence, of fear, and of anguish within themselves. The Word of God in John allows them and helps them to enter the places of darkness and anguish within themselves so that they may enter into transformation. Maybe it is not possible to really enter into the full meaning of the Word of God without living anguish and yearning for transformation through the Spirit of God... Jesus's first mission is in Samaria. Tired, he sits down near the well of Jacob, meets a Samaritan woman who has come to draw water. She is a woman who must be in a lot of inner pain for she has lived five broken relationships. It is never easy to feel rejected, unloved, pushed aside. Her heart is probably filled with guilt and a feeling of worthlessness. Jesus enters into conversation with her, humbly asking her for some water to drink. He needs her. She is astonished, perplexed... Jesus enters into a dialogue with her. She asks questions. Jesus answers, revealing little by little who he is. She begins to trust him and to realise that he must be a prophet. Then Jesus reveals to her that he is the Messiah, the one who reveals all things. She is deeply moved and runs off to tell people in the village that she has met a man who may be the Messiah. The love, humility, and goodness of Jesus have opened her heart.” (<https://www.cardus.ca/comment/article/towards-transformational-reading-of-scripture/#>).

Dear God, let it be so for us too.