

Sunday 19th March 2017



Reading - John 4: 5-19

So he came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon.

A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to

her, 'Give me a drink'. (His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.) The Samaritan woman said to him, 'How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?' (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.) Jesus answered her, 'If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, "Give me a drink", you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water.' The woman said to him, 'Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?' Jesus said to her, 'Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.' The woman said to him, 'Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water.'

Jesus said to her, 'Go, call your husband, and come back.' The woman answered him, 'I have no husband.' Jesus said to her, 'You are right in saying, "I have no husband"; for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!' The woman said to him, 'Sir, I see that you are a prophet.'

The Woman at the well

Throughout Lent, we hear Gospel readings about specific encounters with Jesus. Last week it was Nicodemus, this week it's the Samaritan woman at the well and next week it's the man who was born blind.

I've always considered Lent to be the most important season of the year. Society at large places far greater importance on Christmas, and Easter becomes a Bank Holiday weekend with chocolate eggs and Easter Bunnies. But for Christians, historically, these 40 days of Lent, Holy Week and Easter is far more important and for that reason Easter was celebrated at least 10 centuries before Christmas was even thought of.

Lent has always been a time of repentance, and it's in that context that we hear this story of the Samaritan Woman at the well from John's Gospel.

Over the centuries, the word Repentance has acquired something of a narrow meaning. For a lot of Christians to repent means to feel bad about what a terrible person they've been, a sense of grovelling in their sinfulness, and to be contrite and sorry about that. And sometimes that's no bad thing. But the Biblical meanings of the word are far richer and broader than that.

There are two meanings in the Bible and they're related to each other. On the one hand to repent means to return. It comes from the Jewish experience of exile in Babylon. The people returning to the promised land, back to the place of God's presence, back to the Holy Land. To repent is to return to a connection with God. Repent during this time of Lent – return to God – it is as James Gatherer said yesterday, putting Jesus back into the centre of everything we do.

The other Biblical meaning comes from the Greek word in the New Testament. To repent in the New Testament means to return to God, just as it does in the Old Testament, but it has another layer of meaning. It means to go beyond the mind that you have.

To repent is to return to God and go beyond the mind that you have. A change of attitude.

There are approximately 1000 ministerial posts throughout Scotland and at present about 750 are filled - 250 are vacant. In the next 2 years there are just over 400 minister eligible for retirement (that's not to say that they will all retire!) and there are presently 39 students in training for the ministry. Roughly speaking, we could be facing 50% of all parishes being vacant in 2 years-time. Furthermore, financially, even if there was a full complement of ministers, the National Church would struggle to pay all their stipends. It sounds quite depressing, but there's a part of me which thinks of Paul's 1st letter to the Corinthians when he says, "When you put a seed into the ground, it doesn't grow into a plant unless it dies first". Maybe the old church needs to die before there can be a reawakening of our faith – new wine, old wine skins etc..

It's not so long ago that I visited a parish which was in something of a crisis. Attendance at morning worship was very low; the average age was quite high; and the buildings were close to being condemned with wet rot, dry rot, and general deterioration. On the surface people were desperate for something new, something radical, and something amazing to happen. But deep down, no one wanted change. They certainly didn't want their buildings to close, or consider different ways of worshipping or even meeting in a community hall or local

school rather than the church. And it's very difficult to be part of something new, something radical, something amazing, if there's no change.

We all have minds that have been shaped by culture, shaped by our families, our experiences, our church, and as a result we see only in part. Our minds are blinded by ordinary perception – blinkered by our experience and understanding.

To repent is to return to God and go beyond the mind that you have. If the Church is to survive long-term, it needs to return to God – Jesus Christ at the centre of all we do, and to go beyond the mind it has – think outside of the box, think in a different way, think big!

Back to the story of Jesus and the Samaritan Woman and think of it in this context, let's look at it *beyond the mind we have*.

It's a familiar story, occupying the whole of the 4th chapter of John. Jesus is passing through Samaria on his way to Jerusalem, Samaria separates Galilee in the north from Judea in the south. He stops at a well because he's thirsty there he asks a Samaritan woman for a drink of water, he doesn't have a bucket so he has to depend upon her for a drink. And she is surprised that he a Jewish man asks her, a Samaritan Woman for a drink – surprised that he talks to her at all. The conversation turns to living water, and after that Jesus asks her to go and get her husband, and she replies, "I have no husband", and Jesus says, "I know, you have had five husbands and the man you are living with at the moment is not your husband!"

"I see you are a prophet" she says; someone who can see into my life. And the conversation shifts to where God can be worshipped, ending with her going back to the city and telling people that she has found the Messiah.

Think about it and go beyond the mind that you have.

John's Gospel is quite different from Matthew, Mark and Luke. John isn't writing a diary account, or even an historical account of what Jesus did, so instead of asking, did the story happen in this way, as with all of John's accounts, we should ask, what does this story mean?

Why did the author of John's Gospel tell this story, and why did he tell it in this way?

It's a familiar story, but a story sometimes misunderstood.

This story is the longest conversation between Jesus and anyone else in any of the gospels. And it's with a woman – remember that gender boundaries in that world were seriously rigid. So the longest conversation between Jesus and anyone in the Gospels requires breaking down the barriers of gender.

But it's not just gender – this woman is a Samaritan, we have even more boundaries broken in this conversation. Ethnic and religious boundaries.

Religiously, Samaritans weren't so very different from the Jews. They accepted the Torah, they were the descendants of the tribes of the northern regions. But from a Jewish perspective, they were heretics – they worshipped in the wrong place and they didn't recognise the prophets; they were not really Jews. And there was great hostility between them, sometimes leading to wars and battles.

Gender, ethnic and religious boundaries have been crossed.

Go beyond the mind that you have, because this is one of the most misunderstood stories in the Gospel.

This woman has been married 5 times! What does that say to you? What sort of woman could be married 5 times? A loose woman! A sinful woman? A woman with “a reputation”?

I heard one preacher refer to her as the Harlot Samaritan. Little wonder she couldn't associate with the other women in the village when they came for water early in the morning! Married 5 times.....!!

But the thing is, in that society, only husbands could divorce. Woman could not. It's possible, but unlikely that she'd been widowed five times – quite a few of us have been widowed, but I've never known anyone unfortunate enough to be widowed 5 times.

I think she's a rejected woman - rejected five times.

Was it because she wasn't a very good wife? Turned out she couldn't cook and didn't know how to clean – as would have been expected in that culture? Maybe she was a difficult woman? Outspoken or fractious? Or maybe she was unwilling to submit to her husband, as also would have been expected.

Or was because she was unable to conceive and bear a child and heir? Callously regarded in society as worthless. Rejected time after time.

We'll never know, all we know is that she was so rejected that she had to collect water in the heat of the day when everyone else would have been sheltering in the shade from the sun.

Return to God - think about it and go beyond the mind that you have.

Five times divorced, living with another man, religiously, ethically on the wrong side of the fence, and she's a woman.... and she becomes the first Apostle of Jesus Christ.

Ok, so she's never spoken about as an Apostle, but she is the first person in any of the Gospels to proclaim that Jesus is the Messiah, and if that is the definition of an Apostle, she is the first Apostle.

If repentance is about returning to God and going beyond the mind we have, it's important that we open our minds not only to doing things in a different way, being church in a different way, thinking about our purpose, our mission, our future, but also opening our minds to God's ways, which are not necessarily, and sometimes not even remotely, our ways. We need to open our minds to hearing God's message anew and opening our hearts to even the most rejected of people in society and beyond. Because everything we do as Christians, everything we say, every act of kindness and encouragement, needs to have God – needs to have Jesus Christ at the very centre.

Repent, return to God and go beyond the mind that you have. Amen.