

Sermon for Sunday 12 March 2023 – The Third Sunday of Lent

Pete Postle, Reader

Exodus 17.1-7; Psalm 95; Romans 5.1-11; John 4.5-42

May all I say and think, be always acceptable to thee, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Amen.

There's going to be some history and a little bit of geography built into today's sermon, which will probably be not much longer than the Gospel.

John's Gospel is a work of literary art. Everything he includes would seem to be there for a purpose. He has, as all good teachers, started with a summary of what he is about to describe in detail. 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.' And over the next chapters, John tells us how the knowledge of the word, Jesus, was spread.

And so far, John has described Jesus's baptism by John the Baptist, thus disclosing to Jesus, and to that John, that Jesus is God's anointed. Then follows the miracle of water into wine at the wedding in Cana, by which the disciples are introduced to Jesus's divinity. Thirdly, at last week's reading, the Pharisee, Nicodemus, visits Jesus and is told of the purpose and some of the overall detail of Jesus's mission on earth. So then, the elders of the Jewish religion have been informed, and today we hear of the message being taken to the Samaritans. The well, not any old well, but Jacob's well; it still exists, and it's just outside the modern town of Nablus. Nablus is the name that was here called Sychar in Jesus's time. Nablus is a derivation from the Roman renaming of that town.

Now, at the time we're talking about, Palestine was split into, well, the bits we're interested in, was split into three regions. To the north, Galilee; to the south, Judea; and sandwiched in between, Samaria. Samaria had been part of the northern kingdom, occupied by two of the now lost ten tribes of Israel, Ephraim and Manasseh.

The tribe of Ephraim was very powerful, and it was due part largely to their influence that the northern kingdom of ten tribes split from the southern kingdom of Judea in around 931 BC, which is the death of King David. Then, in 722 BC, Samaria was invaded by Assyria and many of its inhabitants shipped off to exile. In their place came people from five Assyrian and Persian led territories, five different peoples with five sets of gods. Remember that, five different peoples, five sets of gods. A small number of Samaritans remained, but for the most part intermarried with the new incomers. Their Israelite heritage, and their belief in one true God faded, bar a faithful few.

However, by the time of Jesus, their Israelite beginnings had been partly retrieved, to the extent that Samaritans at that time believed in the first five books of the Old Testament, the books of Moses. But they had not inherited all the other history books, and most importantly, the books of the prophets. They had also set up Mount Gerizim as their counterpart to the temple in Jerusalem. So you can see that they have

moved away from Judaism. But all in all, the Samaritans laid claim to their ancestry from the patriarchs by a different route to that claim by the Jews. And the result, not surprisingly, was a great deal of antipathy between the two peoples. Not desperately different from today, really, when you think about it, when Jew, Muslim and Christian each have their different interpretation of biblical events.

And if you think it's all gone and done with in its history, no, there are still a small number of Samaritans living in their home country - 840 according to 2021 figures. So now we are ready to look at Jesus's encounter with a Samaritan woman beside Jacob's Well. Jesus, in what was probably a very much longer conversation than is here recorded, convinces the woman that he is the Messiah for whom she waits; that's the point of our Gospel reading. You won't be surprised to learn that the Samaritan Messiah was rather different to the Jewish one, but alike in that both Jew and Jerusalem were hoping for the return of a powerful king-like leader to restore their nation's fortunes. Now, the commentators I read about this tend to fall into one of two camps here. Firstly, there are those who believe that with so much detail, we must just see this as a historical story. On the other hand, there are those for whom the whole story is symbolic. I'm going to try and safely steer a course embracing both of those two extremes.

To put it in another way, is our Samaritan woman slow on the uptake, or really rather spiritually astute? So we come to this thing, living water, running water, such as a stream, as opposed to the water and the well filled by slow infiltration, perhaps. Jesus means real, lasting knowledge of God and his purpose through the Spirit, as opposed to the gradual development of the law as practised by Jews and to a lesser extent by Samaritans. Or we might think, real knowledge of God through the Holy Spirit, as opposed to harping on about this or that interpretation of Scripture, such as happened then and such as we still indulge in today. The woman says, 'Sir,' - her respect is growing - 'give me of that water, so that I may never be thirsty, or have to be coming here to draw water.' Far too literal in her understanding, or adopting the same use of metaphor as Jesus. Here, I favour the latter, because 'Go call your husband', says Jesus. 'I haven't got one', says she. 'You've had five', said Jesus, 'and your present one isn't really your husband.'

Back to that number five. So, simply the personal record of a woman with a rather unfortunate marital history, or a symbol of Samaria with her history of five sets of gods, and now with imperfect knowledge of a sixth - Yahweh, God of Israelites. The woman responds, here, 'Sir, I see that you are a prophet.' She's caught on. She wonders whether she should be worshipping on Gerizim, her religion, or in the temple of Jerusalem, the Jewish religion. Should we centre our faith on Canterbury? Rome? Salt Lake City? Jerusalem? Mecca? Jesus's answer is clear to her and to us. None of them. There must come a time when each of us recognises that it is none of them. We must be more spiritually mature than that. Jesus doesn't ask us to look forward to some unspecified time yet to come.

The hour is coming and is now here, when the true worshipper will worship the Father in spirit and in truth. And he goes on, God is Spirit and those who worship him must worship in spirit and in truth. Now, you can take that one sentence and offer it to anyone of any faith, any religion, any denomination, and they can agree with you. Even an agnostic or atheist might see your point. Add as many or as few details

you need to make God real for you, to make your faith live and grow and be full of joy inner peace, love and hope. But start from there.

Amen.