

A Woman of Samaria

Sermon on John 4

Jesus is in Judea, and he wants to return to Galilee with his disciples. He leaves early in the morning, and travelling by foot, he arrives tired, around noon, at the well of Jacob in Samaria.

Jean Vanier, a Canadian philosopher and theologian, calls the Gospel of John, the gospel of relationship. For John, he says, life is relationship, life is communion, communion in God, with God, and with each other. John tells of growing relationships with Jesus. Meetings, friendships, a depth of togetherness, growth in community, and a deep desire to give life...

And in today's story Jesus is about to meet a Samaritan woman. Jesus enters into genuine relationship with her. Jesus wants to meet people.

First, we should have some background information about the Samaritans, I guess. The Samaritans and the Jews had been hostile toward each other for about seven hundred years. Like the Jews, the Samaritans were children of Abraham, but they lived in the Northern Kingdom of Israel and had been conquered by the Assyrians. So over time they became cut off from the mainstream of the Jewish religion. These oppressed Samaritans, under Assyrian control, believed only in the first five books of the Bible – not in the books of the prophets, nor in the books of wisdom. Their temple was not in Jerusalem but on mount Gerizim.

In Jesus' day, the Jews were the majority in Israel, and most of them despised the Samaritans, whose religion they thought was worthless. In the eighth chapter of John, some Pharisees say to Jesus to insult him, "You are a Samaritan, and the devil is in you!" There was no greater insult than this: You are a Samaritan!

The Samaritans were considered the lowest of the low.

And unfortunately this is not only ancient thinking. We know that too. In today's world we know of situations too, where a people, a group, or a social class considers itself better than others and despises them.

But back to the story: In John 4 Jesus is tired and sits beside the well.

As a human, Jesus is sometimes exhausted, just like all of us. The disciples have gone to buy food.

Why did all twelve need to go for food? Maybe they were afraid of the Samaritans and wanted to feel safe as a group in case they were attacked and had to defend themselves. Or perhaps they simply needed to get away from Jesus? Between them and Jesus there must have been many moments of tension, and often they did not understand him. Perhaps they needed to leave him so they could talk between themselves... Or perhaps they sensed that Jesus needed to be alone?

In any case, Jesus is there, at noon, alone, hot, and tired.

A Samaritan woman arrives at the well.

And from Bible studies we may know that she has lived through many broken relationships. People who have been hurt in relationships can be closed in upon themselves. This woman, I guess, was maybe very vulnerable, maybe depressed, utterly disappointed, trying to protect herself from further wounds...

Normally women did not come to draw water from the well at noon, when it is hottest. Maybe this woman came to fetch water then, rather than early in the morning as others did, because she had lived through hurtful experiences, even at the well.

Strange looks of the others, pointed fingers, gossip behind closed doors... The woman at the well was a wounded woman, hurt by scorn and broken relationships, a woman with a broken self-image.

John shows us a Jesus who comes close to those who are broken and hurt!

When the Samaritan woman arrives at the well, Jesus asks her, "Give me something to drink." He becomes the needy one, putting himself lower than her, saying, "I am thirsty." He is calling the Samaritan woman to be in the position of giving life to him.

Here Jesus shows us how to approach people who are fragile and vulnerable, like this woman with a broken self-image. His approach is as a beggar, saying: "I need you."

Jesus shows that to approach another from a position of neediness is the way of true compassion, empowering the other.

Jesus is not there simply to do good for this woman. Of course he will do her good, but first he wishes to enter into relationship with her. He wants to meet her, reveal her value, and call her forth. Jesus sees in this woman that which is deep inside her, beyond all the broken relationships of her life, and beyond her feelings of guilt and worthlessness. Jesus sees a woman who is a child of God.

Jesus puts himself in a position of need with respect to her. He raises her up. She is obviously astounded, because Jews would never talk with a Samaritan! Neither would a single man ever speak with an unaccompanied woman. He is doing something radically countercultural.

Astonished the woman recognises that this encounter is out of the ordinary. What is happening? "You, a Jew, are asking for water from me, a Samaritan woman? Why?"

Jesus answers, "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is asking you for something to drink, I had given you living water." Extraordinary words!

If you knew the gift of God...

We know that the gift of God is Jesus himself.

But the woman is also a gift of God. A woman loved by God. She does not seem to know herself very well after all those years... And Jesus tells her, if she had known the gift of God, she would have asked him for water...

Whether the woman understands or not, she begins a conversation with Jesus. How could he give her water? He has nothing in his hands to draw water with. She shares with him what she knows. She begins to meet him.

This meeting with the woman of Samaria is very significant at a symbolic level. In Genesis, it is at wells that important biblical people meet their beloved. Abraham for example, sent his servant to find a wife for his son Isaac. The servant was a bit overwhelmed, wondering, "How will I find someone for him?" He said to himself, "I have an idea! I will be at the well, and I will say to the first woman who arrives, 'Give me something to drink'. If she responds positively, then she will be the one. That is exactly what happened. And Isaac married Rebecca.

Jacob and Rachel also met at a well, as did Moses and Zipporah. The encounters at wells are intimate encounters, they hold in them mutuality and vulnerability. Just as in today's story, Jesus coming to the well and saying to the wounded woman, "Give me something to drink."

This woman is loved by Jesus.

And he has a promise for her.

He reveals to this broken woman the heart of his message. "If you drink that well water, you will thirst again, whereas if you drink the water I give you, you will never be thirsty again."

We all know that.

We drink ordinary water, and we are thirsty again after a few hours. Coffee, tea still our thirst but only for some time. And if we do not have enough to drink, we die. Water is life-giving. If there is no rain, plants die; if there is no harvest, there is death.

The water which Jesus gives, however, is something else. It symbolizes the Holy Spirit, the Spirit that gives life.

Jesus says here the most extraordinary words of the whole Gospel: "The water that I will give will become in the person who drinks it a spring of water welling up to eternal life!"

Jesus promises this woman and each one of us, that if we drink the water he gives us, it will become in us a wellspring of eternal life... connecting us with the life of God and with God forever.

And if we receive life, we can give life. Life will flow out from us.

If we receive the Holy Spirit, we will give of that spirit.

And if we know that we are truly loved, we will be able to love others.

In the story the woman replies, "Give me some of that water. Then I will no longer thirst or need to come here to draw water." Jesus responds; he wants to go further in this conversation. "Go, find your husband and come back here."

She says to Jesus, "I have no husband."

“Yes, you are right,” Jesus replies. “You have no husband. You have lived with five men, and the man you are living with now is not your husband.” Jesus delicately reveals to this woman that she is wounded and fragile, having endured many broken relationships. He adds, “What you say is true.”

If we are not honest about ourselves, Jesus cannot give us the water that will become in us the source of eternal life. If we believe that we are better than others, if we believe that we do not need to be helped or healed, or if we do not recognise our brokenness and our inner darkness, Jesus cannot give us the living water of eternal life.

In our story the woman reveals religious knowledge. “I see that you are a prophet,” she says to Jesus. And then she asks what must have been a central question in her mind: “Who is right? The Samaritans or the Jews?”

Jesus does not respond to this old quarrel. He just says, “Woman, believe me, the hour is coming, and now is upon us, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in the spirit and in Truth.” Through Jesus the spirit will be given, and the truth will be revealed. Through Jesus, and in the spirit, we will enter into a loving relationship with God.

Our prayer will take place not only in mountains or temples, but especially in the heart.

The woman responds showing a belief in the coming of the Messiah, “When the Messiah comes he will tell us everything.” And Jesus replies, “I am he, who speaks to you.”

Jesus is the Messiah.

He looks at her – she who had been rejected and mocked by so many other human beings – with tenderness and love, he reveals to her his secret.

The Samaritan woman is the only person in the Gospel to whom Jesus reveals that he is the Messiah. And transformed by her meeting with Jesus, she goes into the village and calls the people there to meet him.

This Samaritan woman is each of us. The woman stands for all of us who have been wounded in our relationships, who have been humiliated, or who have experienced injustice and rejection. Jesus comes to meet us and transform us through the gift of the spirit so that we too, can give to others the love, the peace, the spirit living in us.

We are all filled with fears, prejudices and wounds. We are afraid of our own limits, our fragility, our mortality. We are afraid of those who are different...

We may be bitter, disappointed, worn out and exhausted...

But if we let go of our defences, we can meet within ourselves those parts of us which are wounded and weak.

It is extraordinary and it is courageous to meet within ourselves the wounded person we have been hiding...

As we welcome our own wounds, and those around us who are wounded, we can enter into true and loving relationships. And we will discover that we are often healed by the ones who have been rejected and put aside and vice versa.

Important is, I think, that we dare to live our relationships in mutual vulnerability and in something like a covenant of love. ...that we see us all as parts of a community in which all are somehow weak, wounded and hurting... And that through the presence of Jesus among us, the wounded can heal the wounds of others...

We all can make the experiences of the Samaritan woman:
Be transformed through Jesus and then step out boldly and call others!

Let me finish my sermon today with a quotation of Pope John Paul II:

Wounded people are humanity's privileged witnesses.
They can teach everyone about the love that saves us;
they can become heralds of a new world,
no longer dominated by force, violence and aggression,
but by love, solidarity and acceptance,
a new world transfigured by the light of Christ,
the son of God who became human,
who was crucified and rose for us."

Amen.