

Sermon for Lent 3: Encountering Jesus

[John 4.5-42]

One Sunday morning, some 10 to 15 years ago, Sara Miles went for a walk in her neighbourhood in San Francisco. For no accountable reason, she walked into a church, ate a piece of bread, took a sip of wine.

What is so unusual about that?

Aged 46 at the time, Sara described herself as *'a secular-intellectual, lesbian, left-wing journalist and atheist, with a habit of scepticism'*. She had never heard a Gospel reading, had never said the Lord's Prayer and knew only one person who went to church.

Worse was to come for her. As she tasted the bread and wine, offered to her as the people in the church danced and sang around the altar, she experienced what she described as *'an unexpected and terribly inconvenient conversion to Christianity'*. Eating the bread and drinking the wine was a radical encounter with a Jesus she'd never known before. To her, the bread and wine felt, as she describes, *'absolutely literal, not an imaginary wafer or symbol'*. Jesus met her in the Eucharist in a way that left no room for atheism. It made her *'want to feed others, as [she] had been fed'*.

The upshot of it was that Sara Miles joined the Episcopalian parish of St Gregory of Nyssa, the church she had stumbled upon, then started a food pantry which now provides free groceries each week to over 1200 families in need, a remarkable lay ministry, feeding others as she had been fed. You can read her story in *Take This Bread: a Radical Conversion*, available either as a book or in a digital version for an e-Reader. For me it was a confronting and uncomfortable read, which is precisely why I feel it's worth reading. If you haven't yet found a good book to read during Lent, I can recommend this passionate tale of conversion, a conversion which didn't leave Sara Miles as a pious, brain dead, far right wing celibate who had succumbed to total naivety. Sara's conversion left her more fully alive, becoming the person God created her to be.

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Today's Gospel gives the story of another woman's confronting encounter with Jesus, another woman who is also an outsider. She is depicted in the stained glass window in the south transept of this church. This nameless

woman is an outsider on several grounds; first, she is from the district of Samaria. The Jews and the Samaritans had shared a common history until there was a massive rift some centuries earlier and by New Testament times there was much hostility between the two, with Jewish people regarding the Samaritans as decidedly inferior.

Add to this the fact that she is female. We are told in the text that when the disciples return from buying food, they are astonished to see Jesus talking to a woman, alone and in public, yet they say nothing.

To cap it all off, she is a person with a dubious past, at least in terms of conventional sexual morality. She has had five husbands and is now in a relationship with a man not her husband. As an outsider on racial, moral and gender grounds, it is no wonder that she is astonished when Jesus speaks directly to her. Perhaps she had come to the well in the heat of the day to avoid contact with other people yet here is this foreigner, this male, speaking to her.

Yet notice how Jesus treats her. He is kind, patient and gentle with her. He engages her in conversation, he takes her seriously, he listens to her and later stays in her town for several days. She is certainly not a nobody in his eyes. We all want to be cherished and regarded as somebody who matters and this is precisely how Jesus treats this nameless woman. It is also how he treats us.

The story can also be challenging for us because it makes us look at who we might regard as nobodies. Is it the person at work who doesn't quite fit in, or the one who doesn't join in? Or perhaps doesn't contribute much to the general effort? Is it the stranger in our midst in whatever gathering we happen to be in? Is it the lonely, the forgotten, the homeless, the refugees, those who are invisible in our society?

While the Samaritan woman is an outsider, she is also a newcomer to faith. Jesus gently leads her both to question what she knows and to take her understanding further. He explains what he means by his metaphors and his allusions and he does not make fun of her. It is a nurturing which has been denied to Nicodemus whose story we heard in last week's Gospel. Nicodemus was hesitant and reluctant to commit, whereas this woman is open and receptive. She is not afraid to ask those questions of Jesus which will enable her growing faith to go deeper. For those of us who are new to taking our faith seriously, this is a source of great hope. Jesus will nurture and encourage us and enable us to grow deeper in our commitment to him.

Even for those of us who've been believers for a long time, there is encouragement. It is OK to doubt, to ask the difficult questions, to seek deeper meaning and understanding. There is a medieval definition of theology as 'faith seeking understanding' and it is in this sense that we are all called to do theology.

Jesus is gentle with the woman, but he is also tough when he confronts her with her past. She says that '*Jesus told me everything I had ever done*'. There is no condemnation of her from Jesus, nor will we receive condemnation from him as we face our own sinfulness this Lent, in personal confession or in the sacrament of reconciliation. Instead of condemnation she is set free to serve and immediately goes into the town to tell others about Jesus, in such haste that she leaves her water jar behind.

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The third confronting encounter with Jesus that I wish to discuss has not happened yet....

It will happen in the next 10 minutes or so....

...as we pray with Fr Richard as he recites the Great Thanksgiving and we hear once more those words of Jesus, *This is my Body, This is my Blood*. This great prayer marks Jesus coming amongst us, coming to each one of us personally, individually but also to us corporately.

- ⇒ Just as Sara Miles was converted in the act of receiving communion, will we know Jesus in the breaking of the bread and be led to ongoing conversion of life?
- ⇒ Like the Samaritan woman, will we accept Jesus as the one who welcomes people who sometimes feel like nobodies, the one who welcomes newcomers to the faith, the one who welcomes people with a past, the one who welcomes people like me ... and you?
- ⇒ Will we be empowered by our partaking of the Body and Blood of Christ to live out Deacon Marilyn's bidding to *go in peace to love and serve the Lord?*

Come, Lord Jesus, come. Amen.