

Lent 23: Sunday 15 March 2020
Christ Church South Yarra
Sermon by Craig D'Alton

Today's remarkable gospel reading is illustrated by my favourite stained glass window here at Christ Church. It is in the south transept above the choir. If you can't see it from where you are, it is also reproduced on the front of the pew sheet.

One of the things I like about this window is the confident stare of the woman. It's almost like she's saying "I dare you to talk to me. No, I double-dare you." She's feisty, the Samaritan woman at the well.

One of the key components of faith is questioning and debate. An unquestioning faith rarely endures, because eventually it runs up against a contradiction that cannot be resolved, and the whole edifice crumbles. Why do some Biblical literalists still insist, against all the evidence, that God created the world in seven actual days, just like it says in Genesis 1? In simple terms, they do so because if that story is not literally true, then what does that say about the other stories of the Bible? If your understanding of truth is that it can only be absolute, and never a shade of grey, or a metaphor, or a story, then, I would argue, your faith risks becoming brittle, inflexible, and easily shattered. No seven days of creation, no Jesus. It becomes as simple and as ridiculous as that. A more robust faith is one that is capable of give and take, capable of nuance and holding contradictions in tension, and capable of changes of mind.

Which is why the Samaritan woman is such a great story.

This story is full of boundary crossing.

Jesus travels through Samaria on his journey from Judea to Galilee. Most religious Jews would have avoided Samaria, and taken the

long way around, but Jesus is compelled, for reasons not noted, to take the direct route. He is in territory outside his comfort zones – certainly outside the comfort zones of his disciples – and in that outside place he encounters the woman. And remarkably, he asks her for a drink. He ought not to do so for two basic reasons – first, because she is a woman, and second, because she is a Samaritan. He crosses two boundaries of proper behavior. Unsurprisingly, the woman is rather taken aback. Yet her response is as unconventional as Jesus' approach. Rather than shyly retreating away in silence, she speaks back – and even does so in a bold way, challenging his breaking of social norms.

The discussion which follows over “Living water” parallels the story we heard last Sunday, in which Nicodemus only half-understood Jesus when he spoke of being born “*anōthen*” – born again, or born from above. Once again today we have a word with two meanings: what is translated as “living water” can mean either fresh, flowing water, or it can also refer to spiritual refreshment. The Samaritan woman, who is after all at the well to get water, cannot move past the first definition. She and Jesus are speaking in parallels, and she does not, perhaps cannot, understand the nuance of his message.

The way in which the woman's faith develops gradually is illustrated by John in the way her mode of address to Jesus shifts throughout the story. Initially she calls Jesus simple ‘you, a Jew’. After Jesus introduces the concept of living water she calls him “Sir, or Kyrios, Lord”.

Jesus, perhaps seeing that he is getting no-where with the water metaphor, decides to change tack entirely: “call your husband.” Leaving aside just for a moment the problematic way in which this section of the passage has sometimes been interpreted, let us simply note for now that the woman gives Jesus a new title “Sir, I see that you are a prophet.” A prophet. She is almost there.

The subsequent discussion on the nature and place of true worship is really quite remarkable. It will be remembered that Jesus crossed boundaries to be in Samaria in the first place, and crossed yet more by speaking to a woman and a Samaritan. Now he actually talks theology with her! So remarkable is that discussion that the woman ventures to speculate and makes first mention of “a messiah”. Jesus’ reply, which ascribes the very Biblical “I am” God-identifier to himself, leaves the woman silent. As the ever-bumbling disciples return, she flees, leaving her water jug behind her.

Having reached her village the woman herself asks the stupefying question: “He cannot be the Messiah, can he?”

The villagers decide to come and see.

The final passage, illustrating the way in which belief develops in the villagers, is itself as remarkable as Jesus’ interaction with the woman. It is easy to gloss over the fact that Jesus – a Jew – stays with these (unclean) Samaritans for two days. And, although some had come to belief because of the testimony of the woman, in the end it is the presence of Jesus that performs in them the final act of conversion. This is not to belittle the role of the woman. She brought “words about Jesus”. Jesus brings himself, in Johannine terms, “The Word”. And the villagers identify not simply that he is the Messiah, but in an almost unique and very high Biblical phrase, that he is the “Saviour of the World.”

Earlier I glossed over the issue of the woman’s five husbands, and the fact that the man she was now with was not her husband. In some traditional interpretations this marks the woman out as a sinner, an adulterer. And yet, it cannot be so. In the ancient world, only a man could divorce a woman, not the other way around. She has had five husbands. Either they must have died, or they must have divorced her or abandoned her. This is a woman who has been through much at the hands of men – so much so that she has

defied social convention and not married her current protector. All the more remarkable then, that she should engage in such a conversation with Jesus. All the more remarkable still that she should be bold enough to be an evangelist to her fellow villagers.

This is a woman who has lived through much. She is poor – she gathers the water herself - not her servant - and in the heat of the day. She has been used and possibly abused by at least six men. And yet she has retained her strong personality, and has an understanding of faith that enables her to engage in a theological discussion that would probably have undone most of the male inhabitants of her village. Gradually, in the argy-bargy of debate, the changing of tack in the face of incomprehension, she comes to understand. Her faith develops and grows. The seeds of ideas long planted – of prophets, of a messiah, of the fulfilment of the promise of Jacob – coalesce into a remarkable faith based not on blind trust, but on understanding born of hard discussion and debate. This woman, staring down on us from the south transept every Sunday, fixes our gaze and challenges us anew: “I dare you to talk to me. I double-dare you.” It’s a dangerous, transgressive invitation, because if we say yes to a dialogue of faith, we take the risk that we too may one day encounter not only the God-words of theological discussion and debate, but the Word of God himself – Jesus Christ, in our very midst.