

Jesus and people of other faiths (3)

John 4

⁴Now he had to go through Samaria. ⁵So he came to a town in Samaria called Sychar, near the plot of ground Jacob had given to his son Joseph. ⁶Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired as he was from the journey, sat down by the well. It was about the sixth hour.

⁷When a Samaritan woman came to draw water, Jesus said to her, "Will you give me a drink?" ⁸(His disciples had gone into the town to buy food.)

⁹The Samaritan woman said to him, "You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?" (For Jews do not associate with Samaritans.)

¹⁰Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water."

¹¹"Sir," the woman said, "you have nothing to draw with and the well is deep. Where can you get this living water?" ¹²Are you greater than our father Jacob, who gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did also his sons and his flocks and herds?"

¹³Jesus answered, "Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, ¹⁴but whoever drinks the water I give him will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life."

¹⁵The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water so that I won't get thirsty and have to keep coming here to draw water."

¹⁶He told her, "Go, call your husband and come back."

¹⁷"I have no husband," she replied.

Jesus said to her, "You are right when you say you have no husband. ¹⁸The fact is, you have had five husbands, and the man you now have is not your husband. What you have just said is quite true."

¹⁹"Sir," the woman said, "I can see that you are a prophet. ²⁰Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, but you Jews claim that the place where we must worship is in Jerusalem."

²¹Jesus declared, "Believe me, woman, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. ²²You Samaritans worship what you do not know; we worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews. ²³Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. ²⁴God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth."

²⁵The woman said, "I know that Messiah" (called Christ) "is coming. When he comes, he will explain everything to us."

²⁶Then Jesus declared, "I who speak to you am he."

3. Jesus and the woman at the well

The Samaritans were the people of Samaria, in the mountains to the west of Galilee, where once Israel's northern kingdom had stood. After the split between north and Judea in the south, in the time of Solomon's son. Samaria had its own sanctuary on Mount Gerizim, to rival that of Jerusalem. The northern kingdom was destroyed by invading forces from the north and east, and the ten tribes under the northern kingdom were scattered forcibly from their home territory by mass deportation, never to return. Nevertheless, the displacement of people wasn't total, the peasant remnants of the tribes remained poor and powerless inhabitants of the region, and as centuries passed their practice of the law which Moses passed to the Israelites from God at Sinai evolved differently, and was subjected to influences from other local indigenous Canaanite religious practices.

The tribe of Judah in the south grew in power and status, developed its cult through the temple at Jerusalem, and looked down its nose at the northern country cousins when it wasn't fighting them. After Judah was conquered and suffered its own deportation to Babylon, the religion of the southern kingdom also evolved differently with the birth of religious ritual in the home, and in the community assembly of the synagogue. The religion of Judah became the Judaism we come to know from the time of Jesus.

Religion in Samaria remained a good deal less sophisticated and rustic in character. Jews learned to hate their near relatives in faith, and so when we read the parable of the Good Samaritan, it is supposed we already understand that Jews and Samaritans go their separate ways. It's what makes the story shocking to a Jewish reader, that this outcast is the one who does the right thing by the man fallen among thieves, when all the pious religious officials of Judaism pass him by on the other side. This Samaritan treats a foreign stranger in trouble as if he were a neighbour, with generosity born of compassion. This despised representative of ancient Israelite religion is praised as a good example of fidelity to God's command to love your neighbour as yourself.

In the story of the Samaritan woman whom Jesus meets at the well, St John spells it

out for those unaware of this deep spiritual family rift. 'Jews have no dealings with Samaritans' - hence the woman's surprise that Jesus should speak to her and ask her for a drink. She would know by his appearance that he was one of them, not one of her own kind. Such was the animosity between Jews and Samaritans, that they wouldn't share a common drinking cup, or a plate for fear of becoming contaminated, unclean.

In this story, the initiative is taken by Jesus. He acts from his own point of need - thirst is sufficient for him to disregard social conditioning, and to invite the women to do the same by giving him a drink. Surprised by this, she starts a conversation with him. His response is cryptic. "If only you knew what God gives and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would ask and receive life giving water." She thinks about the well next to her, and refers to the fact that it has a place, as Jacob's well in the story of ancestral faith which they share, in the books of the Torah. She recognises that being people shaped and formed by the same holy book matters in defining who they both are. "You don't claim to be greater than Jacob do you?" she says.

Jesus re-directs the conversation to the promise of fulfilment which he offers, touching upon her own inner longing. Then he deftly exposes that the root of her problem is her dysfunctional relationships with men. It's too much for her, fearing more condemnation and rejection, such as she is used to, or else she wouldn't be out there drawing water alone in the heat of the day. She tries to protect herself from his probing, by returning to the matter of the religious differences between them – which mountain is the holy place of sacrifice God endorses? Jesus dismisses contention by proposing a unifying vision, in which special holy places and differences aren't important, because what matters is worshipping in spirit and in truth. She picks up on this as an aspiration for the coming age of the Messiah. Then he reveals, I am the one.

Here differences of gender, culture and religion are overcome by them being able to find points in common, and overcome fear threatening separation by reference to a higher order of spiritual reality than that which their differences express. It's a painful process for this lonely rejected woman. For her, this inter-faith exchange is the

beginning of her healing journey, not the occasion of it. She doesn't turn to Jesus seeking to get well or improve her life. He comes to her, and offers possibilities she had never even thought of.

Jews and Samaritans have so much in common, and yet were alienated from each other profoundly by their own fixed ideas and prejudices. This may perhaps remind us of past divisions between Protestants and Catholics, and present differences between Christians and Muslims, as well as Jews, each of whom has done their measure of harm towards the other over the centuries.

I would like to believe that exchange and dialogue, seeking common ground, accepting differences, facing hurts and prejudices between people of different faith is a necessary part of discipleship that begins with the initiative of Jesus. It is a journey into self-knowledge, as well as knowledge of the other. Reconciliation is part of God's healing process, and in the context of interfaith dialogue the prospect of reconciliation may seem to be inconceivable. Yet, wherever there are wounds, wherever there is a need to deepen self knowledge, there God will urge us forward to seek ways in which we can find things in common in the midst of the differences, and therein find healing.