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19.3.17

Becoming Like Christ by Breaking with Tradition

John 4:5-30

Chapters 3 and 4 of St John's Gospel tell us about 2 quite different conversations that Jesus had. They were with individuals we would not normally have expected to meet Jesus as he travelled around the country with his band of followers. Conversations with Jesus change people. They will change us. Jesus is always full of surprises, particularly when it comes to the type of people he will meet with.

You see God specialises in finding and changing people we consider out of reach. Nicodemus and the woman at the well, both for different reasons might seem out of reach.

Terry told us last week of Nicodemus, a Pharisee, a senior Jewish Church leader, very much an "insider" in Jewish society yet he sought out a meeting with Jesus by cover of night? Attracted by what he knew of Jesus, but afraid. What if any of his colleagues found out, what would they think of him? It's much safer being on the inside, being one of God's chosen people. From what I've read the first century Jews were more afraid of becoming, unclean, an "outsider" than they were of anything else.

So Nicodemus wanted to check Jesus out, without anyone else knowing about it, so he could keep his options open and not have to own having a connection to Jesus. Any of us feel ever like that, about our faith, sometimes? Those of us who were here at the lent course on Wednesday evening know that Peter, the apostle who became the first Pope, felt like that on the night before the crucifixion when he denied Jesus 3 times. I found it very reassuring.

This morning our focus is Jesus' conversation with an "outsider", the Samaritan woman at the well. Jesus, hot and tired from the journey, rested by Jacob's well while the disciples went into town to get food. (Jacobs well is still there in the crypt of an Orthodox Church that we visited on our trip to the Holyland last September.)

It was about midday when the woman came to collect water. Odd time! Coming to get water in the heat of the day. The majority of women came to collect their water in the cool of the early morning or the early evening. Coming in the heat of the day suggests this woman wanted to avoid others, it indicates she felt shame. She wasn't part of the incrowd!

I can imagine her anxiety levels rising as she approached the well seeing a Jewish man sitting there. " Oh, oh what's going to happen now?" Then he speaks to her. This is really shocking. Everyone knew that the Jewish law was very strict about men interacting with women, it said "one should not talk with a woman on the street, not even with his own wife, and certainly not with somebody else's wife because of the gossip of men" and " it is forbidden to give a woman any greeting".

Not only was she shocked because of her gender, her shame, but also because she was a Samaritan.

The reasons Jews do not associate with Samaritans are historical dating from the division of the land after the death of Solomon. Samaria was the capital of the Northern Kingdom, it fell to the Assyrians and many Jews were deported to Assyria, foreigners were brought in to settle the land

and keep the peace. In time intermarriage between the foreigners and the remaining Jews resulting in a mixed race. These people who became known as Samaritans were hated by the pure blood Jews who felt that they had betrayed their people and nation.

Isn't Jesus radical, always breaking with tradition to reach someone in need! The love and care Jesus has for us overrides all human tradition.

Here she is, the woman at the well, alarmed and anxious, and Jesus simply asks her for a drink of water. He is thirsty. And the fascinating conversation begins. It's on 2 different levels. The woman is talking about the practicalities, but how can you give me any water, you haven't got a bucket? Jesus is talking about spiritual thirst.

As Terry was telling you last week we spent our wedding anniversary in Venice. When we were telling our grandson about it, he couldn't get his 3 year old head round the fact that there were no roads and everywhere you either went by boat or walked. We were asked if it was smelly! Well not on the grand canal, it's like the main artery full of hustle and bustle, the water is constantly moving, but you can catch the occasional wiff as you past a small canal. It's only stagnant water that smells. Running water doesn't. It's running water, oxygenated water that you need to support fish and plant life. When Jesus refers to "living water" he is using a metaphor. We know water is essential to life. Verses 13 and 14 "everyone who drinks ordinary water will become thirsty again. But who ever drinks the living 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". I think Jesus is meaning the indwelling gift of the Holy Spirit who is available to all believers. It's the Holy Spirit who leads and guides us, enabling us to flush out the corners where stagnant water lurks in us.

God and water are essential to life. But it's God alone who can give us the gift of eternal life. It's as if Jesus is saying what will give us deep satisfaction and contentment bubbles up from within us, it doesn't depend on what is going on outside of us, on external circumstances.

We are all looking to find peace and satisfaction in life, we set our hopes on different things, if I get that promotion I'll feel better? if my husband would be more romantic it would make all the difference? if I had more money I would be happier?

I found this quote by the great tennis champion Boris Becker "I had won Wimbledon twice, once as the youngest player, I was rich, had all the material possessions I needed; it was the old song of the movie stars and popstars who commit suicide, they have everything, yet they are so unhappy. I had no inner peace."

In verse 15 the woman asks Jesus for the "living water" and the conversation seems to change direction "go call your husband and come back". But Jesus isn't changing the subject he is helping her see that she has been trying to find peace and satisfaction through her relationships with men. It just hasn't worked.

Jesus is saying to the woman at the well and to us " the deep inner thirst of your soul can only be met by me".

We might say, well that sounds great but how do I get this "living, life giving, water that Jesus talks about. Do we have to search, dig, pass a test to find it? This passage tells us and it's really surprising. Look again at the first words Jesus says to the woman, he asks for a drink, he is thirsty. We can find peace and satisfaction, salvation if you want to use a theological word, because Jesus is thirsty. He is thirsty for us. A thirst and a love none of us can imagine. Remember what Jesus says as he hangs on the cross "I thirst". He also says it is finished, completed. The "thirst" of Jesus enables you and I to have our "spiritual thirst" satisfied.

It's God's gift and all we have to do is receive it, respond to what Jesus has done for us. As we respond we become more like Jesus.

Jesus breaks with tradition. What would it mean for each of us to break with our personal traditions, extending ourselves outside our comfort zone?. It may be praying out loud in front of others for the first time. It may be joining a small group. It may be signing up for New wine and experiencing worshipping with 5000 others in one arena, or a mission trip to Uganda or India. Or simply talking to a stranger. Small steps are OK. We step out, Jesus helps us. Jesus won't let you down.

Amen.