

The Third Sunday in Lent  
Year A - 15/3/2020

Exodus 17:1-7

Psalm 95

Romans 5:1-11

John 4:5-42

**In the name of the Trinity; Creator, Redeemer, and Life-Giver...**

Language is a powerful thing, isn't it? Although we say to kids sometimes when they are young "don't worry about what other people say"; or remember that old saying, "sticks and stones may break my bones but names can never hurt me", the truth is that when people label us it is hurtful - deeply painful.

It has been noted that in many situations, when a person or a group of people is being persecuted or down-trodden, a very subtle, yet powerful thing happens. Instead of being referred to as a "black person", or a "gay person", or a "greek person", they are reduced to this: "I don't like it how those blacks do that", or "those gays really offend my sensibility", or "I can't stand it when those greeks all speak their own language around me".

Did you notice what happens - no longer are they even being referred to as people - not a black person, but "the blacks". What a de-humanising experience; how can we think that our language will not do irreparable damage...

Our Gospel passage has a number of elements which reflect this sense. Firstly, Jesus engages in conversation with "a Samaritan" - the worst sort in the eyes of the Jews. Unclean, with different beliefs, we are told, quite plainly by the Gospel writer "Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans".

Secondly, Jesus is conversing with a woman. Not only that, but a woman who is being rejected even by her own kinsfolk. We know this because of the fact that she is at the well in the heat of the day, and has not come with the rest of the women who come in the cool of the dawn.

So, what are we witnessing here in Jesus' actions? Is this *just* about the breaking down of social and religious barriers? Is this just about the radical inclusion which Jesus preaches and lives out? I argue not, although we cannot of course in any way downplay this aspect, or diminish it.

Barbara Pine, a 20th century writer, made the following, profound observation: "Sometimes being listened to is so much like being loved, it is impossible to tell the difference." (repeat)

For me, the inclusion we witness in today's Gospel begins with the engagement of the woman in conversation by Jesus. The depth of their conversation is profound, reflecting perhaps in a metaphorical sense the depth of the well beside which they converse. But it all flows from Jesus' willingness to listen to the woman.

Yes, this is a Samaritan; yes, this is a woman; but more importantly, this is someone who in all likelihood, because of the stigma under which she lives, has simply not been listened to for a very long time. She was not judged worthy enough to be listened to; she was not considered important enough to have an opinion. And despite this, Jesus listened to her. Or, as Pine suggests, Jesus loved her.

None of this conversation; none of the conversion which subsequently flowed could have happened without the risk of engagement. Jesus sees through this woman, with all her accompanying baggage, and deems her worthy; worthy of his time and his conversation... and his love...

Many of us personally know profound gratitude and joy for the way God has accepted us and loved us and showered us with grace, no matter who we are or where we are on life's journey. Knowing God's grace, how do we then go out, like this woman, in radical engagement and share the good news - Can it be? Is it too good to be true? Come and see! Like the nameless woman at the well, maybe we feel as though we're the least likely to be called to spread the good news.

Most of us are not only not perfect, we're the wrong something, we're "other" in some way or sorts that would seem to disqualify us from being believed by the rest of the folks in town. But this encounter with God through the Body of Christ, this extravagant hospitality and profound acceptance that we experienced in our liturgy, and as a member of a community of faith, can transform our lives.

Meeting one another and worshipping God together, simply and honestly, as our true selves, transforms our lives just as surely as meeting Jesus transforms the life of that solitary but spirited woman by the well. For in this mystery that we celebrate this morning, Jesus comes to us; Jesus listens to us; Jesus shows his love for us in the giving of his body and the shedding of his blood.

Many of us live outside of the wilderness and its deprivations, so water is plentiful and readily available to us. But today's narrative prompts us to think about times when we truly thirsted, for water, or for new life. How do we seek to know Jesus; to be known by Jesus in those times when we can scarcely even know and love ourselves?

It also requires us to be honest about the question of who comes to "the community well" at a different, more uncomfortable time, than the rest of the community? Who experiences this isolation and loneliness? Who in our community or in our life truly thirsts for good news, for community, for salvation, for grace?

Remember how this radical conversion started for the Samaritan woman. Jesus engaged with her. In the same way, our task involves engagement with others. So often we feel as though we don't have the words to speak or the message to deliver. But if what is required of us is simply an open engagement with 'the other', then I think we have run out of excuses.

Come and see for yourselves. Come and be named for who you are; for who you have been; for who you are yet to become. Come and see what he will find in you; what labels and scars he will peel back; and call you to leave behind and live free from; a call both exhilarating and terrifying.

Come and see. Come and confess that this one is truly the saviour of the world;  
Come and see; that he might pour into your hearts the living water of being truly  
and deeply known; forgiven and accepted; Come, and be listened to; come, and be  
loved...

In the name of God. Amen.