

Bishop Libby Lane

Farewell service sermon

30 March 2019

I chose today's readings some time ago.

I encourage you to read through Paul's letter to the Philippians in its entirety. I've been reading and rereading it as I prepare to move: the love and hope and gratitude Paul expresses for Christ and His people in this letter, articulates much of what I want to say as I go – Paul says it better than I could, so read Philippians and know it echoes my continuing prayers for you all.

I want to reflect on the story of the Samaritan woman as a model of discipleship this morning, but as we heard Chris read Philippians for us today, it seems to have something important to say in these turbulent and uncertain times.

And, my goodness, what turbulence and uncertainty we are facing at every turn.

We could do a whole lot worse, I think, than to take the passage as a manifesto for every aspect of our life, individual and shared (the letter was written to a community not an individual after all, and so is intended to be about group behaviours, attitudes and actions – not just personal belief):

'Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others.'

Well, 'amen' to that, in our politics, our neighbourhoods, our homes – as well as our churches. If only we could have the mind that was in Christ as we face personal, familial, societal and national choices and decisions. So, whatever else, let's pray that in all those circumstances, Jesus' example is followed, His name will be honoured, he will be recognised as Lord - and God's Kingdom comes.

Let's consider this Samaritan woman's story, and how her example may help us be agents for the coming of God's Kingdom.

In this story we hear again that Jesus draws us closer, and sends us further.

Just before the passage we heard from John's Gospel, we are told that Jesus was on his way from Judea to Galilee, travelling through Samaria, and he stopped to sit at Jacob's well in the middle of the day because he was tired out by his journey.

Jesus had come to where this woman was.

Jesus always comes to us first, he finds us where we are. That's how he draws us close, by coming to get us.

The disciples, when they returned, wondered why Jesus would engage this woman (any woman, any Samaritan, anyone whom society had marginalised). And it's a good question. But the answer is that she was there and she had the resources to help. The most unlikely people turn out to be the ones who can really make a difference.

Wonderful drama introduced our engagement with scripture

That's all of us, if we're honest, even if on the outside we seem to be OK. Actually, we are all isolated from God – we may also be wrongly excluded by society, like this Samaritan woman, for those things that God does not reject us for – but all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.

And yet, it is to this mixed up, damaged, apparently failed woman that Jesus turns:

'give me a drink'.

Jesus requests her help. He makes himself vulnerable and trusts her to respond. And that it seems is his way. He asks for our participation.

That's a vocation: to hear Jesus ask for our participation, to join in with Jesus.

Not just with what goes on in these buildings, but in places where we are everyday. Wherever someone is 'thirsty' – in any way – it's Jesus we are serving in our response.

Jesus really was in need: hot, tired, thirsty and without the means to get his own drink. Following the path of Christ does not mean we always hold the power, or have the answers, or are the ones with solutions. Jesus genuinely needed help and asked for it. And in the asking turned this woman's world around.

I hope he got his drink. It's not clear – but I hope that while the conversation was going on this woman was also undertaking the mundane, practical, necessary, life-giving task of drawing water and Jesus had his real thirst quenched.

Through the rest of this story in John's Gospel we discover that this Samaritan woman had been married 5 times, and was now living with someone who was not her husband. We don't know why: she may have been widowed, she may have been divorced, she may have been rejected by her own family – but it meant she was outcast and ashamed. But Jesus took her seriously, asked for her help, listened to her and offered her salvation. Jesus wanted to get closer still, so she would not be afraid.

Jesus engages every bit of us, even those bits we hide or keep to ourselves. He gives us the security to stay close. Jesus wants our honest response. He knows who we are, what we need, what we hope for. And loves us anyway. This encounter gave this woman hope, and in a beautiful echo of Jesus request to her, she voices her own need and asks Jesus to meet it:

'give me this water'

This is a wonderful example of being Christian: Jesus comes to us, invites us in and then provides what we need to be faithful so we can go far for him.

Jesus draws us closer – but to send us further. Being close to Jesus, gave this woman the courage to be and do and speak for him.

This story continues:

'His disciples were astonished that he was speaking with a woman, but no one said ... 'Why are you speaking with her?'. Then the woman left her water jar and went back to the city. She said to the people, 'Come and see the man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?'

Jesus drawing this woman close, gave her courage to go further. Because of her the disciples had their mindset changed. Because of her those among whom she lived were invited to come close to Jesus themselves.

And did you hear? She left her water jar – so Jesus did get his drink.

This story has the best ending. The Samaritans did go to see Jesus, and he stayed with them, and many of them, we're told, believed. What they said to that woman, is what I pray many will be able to say of me. This, I think, would be the best epitaph for any ministry:

'It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Saviour of the world.'