

The Woman at the Well – John 4:5-42

At first I was afraid, I was petrified, kept thinking I could never live without you by my side... anyone recognise those words?

Yes? Gloria Gaynor – I will survive, the 1970's disco classic.

This week Gloria released a 20 second clip of herself washing her hands thoroughly while singing the chorus.

It's something we've all been asked to do – make sure we wash our hands thoroughly with hot water and soap to combat coronavirus and to help us do that it has been suggested we sing different songs or choruses to do so – happy birthday is one, we've also suggested the Lord's Prayer!

Many people are having to self-isolate and we may have to do more of that soon. There are steps we have to take to help look after each other. Many are concerned about being alone during this period.

The gospel reading of today finds us in the companionship of someone who also self-isolated. A woman who through the stigma others have attached to her – finds it easier to go alone to the well in the hottest part of the day so that she will not see anyone, not be subject of dirty looks or whispered comments.

The woman at the well is a well-known passage from the gospel of John, and often the focus is on how Jesus crossed so many social barriers to share his good news with her.

A good respectable Jewish man should not have been alone with a woman, let alone a Samaritan woman, and a sinful woman who had been married many times and was now living in sin. Sometimes we miss one of the smallest, most obvious parts of this story. Jesus offers her a way to quench her spiritual thirst, 'v 14, 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.' And after some debate, she accepts, she says yes.

Yes, this story is important in its social justice, reminding us that the gospel is for every person no matter what his or her race, social position or past sins.

For us today it reminds us that at times for good or ill we are isolated.

But it's also a passage which is important in its simplicity – an offer of being listened to, and of refreshment, of eternal life which is accepted.

At first the Samaritan women confused the two types of water – the water in the well and the living water of eternal life that Jesus is offering her.

‘But sir, you don’t have a rope or a bucket? And this well is deep, where would you get this living water?’ She recognises that Jesus was a Jew, and I would suggest (from what she says to him) that she realised Jesus was a Rabbi or teacher. Therefore, she was aware that there was another meaning to his request for a drink, but she’s still a little unsure or confused. I wonder is it possible that this is the first time someone has spoken to her about spiritual hunger and thirst? Perhaps it’s been a while since we considered our own hunger or thirst?

And by being there alone – isolated. Having been socially distanced the Samaritan woman is then greatly blessed by her time with Jesus.

When we read on further in John’s gospel and the story of the woman at the well, we discover that she went into her village and shared the news, she brought them to the well to see and hear Jesus, they heard his offer, some did not accept, but many did. She was infectious in her sharing.

Is it possible that we know people who, like the Samaritan woman, people who have never had the opportunity to speak about the deep spiritual thirst for God within? And is it possible that we could bring them to the well, to meet Jesus. Perhaps we need to go to the well ourselves.

Jesus sat with one woman at the well, he sat and he talked with her, one to one. He shared with her. He discussed with her – he debated with her – he challenged her. It is often the one-to-one conversations which can be so important. The deep encounters.

We are in Lent, a time when we deny ourselves the things that distract us, we choose to separate ourselves. It may come that we physically have to separate ourselves from each other. We can approach this with panic and fear, or we can know that Jesus meets us there in that place and that our lives can be transformed by that encounter.

Jesus says –

Come to me, all who are thirsty, and I will give you living water, I will quench your thirst.

Come to me all who are weary and heavy laden, I will give you rest.

Come to me.

Amen

With thanks to Catherine who helped enormously in the development of this sermon!

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