

## **“Fly on the well”**

–a sermon for the third Sunday of Lent

Gospel Reading: St. John chapter 4, verses 5-42

I'm sure that on everybody's mind this morning is this situation with the virus. But as this is likely to be with us for some time yet and there will be other opportunities for sermons and reflections, I'm not going to concentrate on this today.

Instead, we are at a well in Samaria. We all know the expression, *“Fly on the wall”*, but today we are a *“fly on the well”* as we overhear this strange conversation between Jesus and an unnamed woman. What does it mean?

I think there are perhaps three ways in which we can understand this conversation. Firstly: it may be a genuine recollection of a real conversation treasured by a particular community. That community was the Samaritan Church. Those Samaritans who became believers will have remembered and treasured that conversation as it was told them by the woman at the well. It was the story of their origins. It was how their Church had begun. Jesus himself had come to their town; to their well, and the seeds of faith had been planted. Think of other churches who trace their origins to a visit by one of the early saints. (like the *Mar Thoma Church* in South India who believe that the apostle Thomas visited them in the first century.) Well, the Samaritan Church could say; *“It was Jesus himself who visited us, and this is how it happened!”*

Or, could this gospel reading be St. John giving us a Christian sermon in the form of an imagined conversation; the sort of conversation Jesus could well have had? It is, after all, full of Gospel truths, such as *“God is Spirit, and those who worship him must worship him in Spirit and in truth.”* You don't need a special place to worship God. Remember that by the time this gospel was written, those special places were gone anyway. The Temple at Jerusalem and the temple at Mount Gerazim were both destroyed, were just a memory. Or those words about *“living water”*; the gift of the Spirit that Christ promises to those who trust in him. Or the words, *“I am he.”* I am the Messiah for the Jews, for the Samaritans, for the gentiles, for all who will believe. There are many Gospel truths in this overheard

conversation. Is it an imaginative sermon?

Or a third way of understanding these words is as a clever allegory; a story told with a hidden meaning. Maybe St. John has done this already in chapter two with the water into wine miracle which surely isn't just about water into wine, but about the old Covenant being replaced by the New Covenant; Law being transformed into Grace? Those stone water jars after all were for the Jewish rites of purification. That water became the new wine. The Old religion became the Gospel. And here, the clue may be in that strange observation of Jesus, "*You have had five husbands and the one you have now is not your husband.*" The Samaritans traced their origins to five foreign tribes (with presumably their five gods). These tribes had been forcibly moved in to Northern Israel centuries before by the Assyrians, replacing the majority of Jews who had been exiled to other parts of the Empire. These five tribes had married into the remaining Jewish population and became the Samaritans. They had adopted the God of Israel (always a safe bet when you are living on his territory.) They shared the same Bible with the Jews (at least the first five books of Moses) and they considered themselves as Jacob's offspring. Most Jews of course hated them and didn't see them as "*brothers in faith*" at all. Is this what the "*five husbands*" means? Is this their five former gods? And when Jesus says, "*and the one you have now is not your husband*", does it mean, "You think you are in right relationship with God, and you're not." Is this the hidden meaning? We cannot tell.

But if we take this episode as a real conversation, it does ring true psychologically. Perhaps the "*five husbands*" thing was literal, and the woman was ostracized or at least felt a deep sense of shame? Why else come to the well at noon when it was unbearably hot, unless it was to avoid meeting people? The other women of the village would come in the cool of the day; in early morning or later in the evening. And why else would the woman change the subject away from this most personal one to talk instead about the safer topic of religion? Jesus mentions the five husbands and she says, "*Our ancestors worshipped on this mountain, but you say it should be in Jerusalem.*" We can sense her acute discomfort. She is backing off and changing the subject.

However we understand this story, perhaps there are two

things we can take away from our “*fly on the wall*” experience? The first might be the “five husbands” thing. Jesus pinpoints a real issue which was troubling the woman very deeply and she hid behind religion to avoid it. Do we at times avoid a real issue that God –or our conscience—is confronting us with. We avoid the subject. We may even hide behind our religion. So there’s a possible challenge; something to think about.

And the second thing is to notice how Jesus overcomes the barriers between people. Even if this conversation is imagined, it is the sort of thing that Jesus did. Jesus was regularly criticised for associating with what some would consider as “*the wrong sort*.” Jesus would speak to a Samaritan even though it wasn’t the done thing. Jesus would speak to a woman (and even this wasn’t done publicly in that culture.) Jesus was no respecter of the social and religious barriers of the time. He would speak to anyone. He would befriend anyone. Now this is probably NOT the time to be making new friendships; social distancing is to be the order of the day, at least for these next months. But how easy it is ONLY to associate with people just like us; people of the same background; the same tastes; and at a deeper level, the same faith, or the same sexuality. Jesus, I’m sure, would be at home with Jews and Samaritans, with Muslims and Gays and people of all backgrounds and types. Jesus would be at home with all. Are we? That’s a challenge for the future.