

## Sermon – Sunday 21<sup>st</sup> Feb 2021

In 21<sup>st</sup> century Sheffield, if you talked about the Samaritans, many people would assume you were talking about the folk who are trained to staff the phonedlines which are contacted by people who are feeling absolutely desperate, and don't think they have anywhere else to turn.

“Being a good Samaritan” is a phrase that many people would understand, even if they have never read or heard Jesus' story about the man who helped a traveller who had been attacked on his journey from Jerusalem to Jericho.

But, in the context of the time and place where Jesus lived and taught, God-fearing Jews would acknowledge no such thing as a good Samaritan. Samaritans claimed the same lineage as Jews, through Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, but Jewish people should have nothing to do with them because they didn't worship God in the right way or in the right place. Looking at our Old Testament reading we encounter another person who would be considered beyond the pale. Eunuchs were forbidden from entering the assembly of the Lord, so it is an interesting twist that God chooses someone who is outside the bounds of religious purity to rescue Jeremiah.

Those in authority, who found Jesus troublesome, would be able to use this story as more ammunition against him – here is evidence of him initiating conversation with a Samaritan. Not only that, but it's a Samaritan woman. And to make it even worse, the intervening verses, which we didn't read today, show that she is a woman whose morality is definitely not beyond reproach. The more natural time for someone to go and collect water would be early in the morning or into the evening when it was a bit cooler. But, this woman is out

in the midday sun, possibly the time when she can come to the well without fear of being pointed at and gossiped about.

And yet, Jesus takes the opportunity to share with her something of the good news that he is bringing into the world. In the context of sitting by a well feeling thirsty, he starts to talk about living water. And, understandably, she doesn't really get it. Why is this man sitting beside a well, asking her to give him a drink, if he has access to fresh, flowing, living water? She is clearly impressed that Jesus seems to know about her personal history, and she asks him to give her the water that he speaks of so that she won't need to keep coming back to the well. Once she gets back to the city, she can't help talking about the man she has just met. She knows that there is something very special about him, and seems to be asking herself as well as those around her, "He cannot be the Messiah, can he?"

Our focus for the study groups and sermon series during Lent is "Living with a World of Difference". One of the things my few months on placement at St Mark's has encouraged me to focus on is a greater awareness and understanding of diversity, so the wonderings I am sharing with you this morning have developed in that context.

I don't have any first-hand experience of how people worship in other cultures and in other parts of the world, but I do remember thinking about diversity within our diocese fairly early on in my Reader training. One of the great joys of doing the course was earning more about the breadth of the Church of England through forming relationships with other people. When I went to my first diocesan development day I loved looking round the hall spotting a few familiar faces from my course. I was really excited by the idea that all of us, with

different understandings, traditions and worship styles were united by wanting to serve God in our own contexts. However, looking back, when compared to the worldwide church, it is noticeable that we still had quite a lot in common. How might that hall have looked from another person's viewpoint? If someone from outside the Christian faith community saw that group of people, who were predominantly white and used quite developed literacy skills to worship, would they feel included or excluded? The way people feel when they encounter churches or groups of Christians, will often have a huge impact on how they think God sees them and responds to them.

I realise now that growing up in a country which had a very early industrial revolution probably implanted the idea that productivity and economic growth were marks of progress. That is not how a large proportion of the world functions and it would be wrong to impose that kind of lifestyle. I wonder if I may have accepted a similar unconscious bias about the development of faith. For a couple of centuries it was mainly European countries which sent missionaries to other parts of the world. I am starting to realise that in a post-colonial world there may be an underlying idea that the ultimate goal of churches around the world is to have the same understandings and practices as we do in the West, which should be challenged. One thing I have decided recently is that, as well as the academic study of ecotheology for my course, I need to learn from the theology of the churches where climate change is already having a huge impact on everyday life.

What might the story of Jesus' unexpected encounter mean for us, where our city and our country are usually much more multi-cultural than our churches? How can we welcome and celebrate all sorts of difference in a genuine way?

How do we feel when an unexpected person or group receives and shares a new revelation from God? Is it important that, like the Samaritan woman, our churches offer a place where people meet with Jesus, and are then allowed to take the initiative in deciding how best to share that good news with those closest to them?

I'm going to close our time of reflection with one of the prayers written for last month's week of prayer for Christian unity –

Lord, you invite us to abide in you who are the vinedresser who cares for us with love.

You call on us to see the beauty of each branch united to the vine, the beauty of each person.

And yet, too often the differences in others make us afraid.

We withdraw into ourselves. Our trust in you and one another is lost.

Come and direct our hearts toward you once again.

That as one family we may praise your name.

Amen.