

### 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Lent, Eucharist

Exodus 17: 1-7, Romans 5: 1-11 and John 4: 24-30

#### Mother Emma

Crafting Bible stories in such a way that they can be read to and appreciated by the smallest of children is a particular calling, and one which I have always thought must be peculiarly challenging. The different books and stories of the Scriptures are so profound, and often so tied up with the weaknesses and sins of the human condition, that the overarching message of God's love for us in spite of everything could be too obscure for tiny minds which, as Jesus told us, are the model for the uncomplicated openness and innocence we should all aspire to.

I came across one of my favourite examples of this kind of editing in a Bible storybook which called itself the Toddler Bible, given to one of my sons when they were very young. Unusually for such books, it did contain the story of the Samaritan woman at the well which we have just heard, but I was wryly amused to note that at the point where Jesus reveals that he knows she has had five husbands, and the man with whom she is now living is not her husband, the text read, "Jesus told her all kinds of wonderful things, and she realized he was the Son of God!"

I have often pondered gently what was in the mind of the editor as they tried to make the "real" story Jesus told into something accessible for the under-5s – and came up with this!

For the story of the Samaritan woman at the well is a narrative of extreme complexity, which reveals so many of humanity's narrowminded faults, as visible today as they were then, whilst at the same time assuring us of the "wideness of God's mercy", as the hymn goes. From the perspective of the disciples travelling with Jesus, contemporary observers, or readers of the Gospel in those early days, everything, but EVERYTHING was wrong with the person Jesus approaches at Jacob's well.

First, she is a woman. No righteous first-century Jew would initiate a conversation with a woman without at least one other person present, for fear of either temptation or accusations of impropriety by others.

Second, he is aware that she has, to put it mildly, a complicated relationship history. She comes alone to the well in the heat of the midday sun, rather than, as would have been customary, with a group of honourable matrons who would come together for propriety earlier in the day, but from which group she has clearly been excluded, ostracized by her bad luck (or bad judgement) with men.

Third, she is a Samaritan – a person of dubious race, dubious nationality and very dubious religion – at least as far as religious Jews of that period were concerned.

We see her own utter surprise and disbelief when Jesus asks for a drink from her vessel and St John explains for those of us who might not be aware of how shocking this is, "*Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.*"

The Samaritans who lived to the north of Israel were originally from the tribes of Israel which separated from Judah, but by now, those areas were largely inhabited by other foreigners, who had arrived or been left behind by the movements of the great Empires in the area. They believed that they worshipped the same God, and the woman refers to their shared ancestor in Jacob and to a belief in the coming of the Messiah, but Samaritans did not acknowledge the Jews' belief that true worship must take place or be centred around Jerusalem, as the Holy City. All this rendered them "impure", as we are well aware from the story of the Good Samaritan, in the eyes of the Jews, including those who followed Jesus.

So this person embodies all the prejudices and flashpoints of Jesus' day, gender, sexual morality, race, nationality, faith, yet Jesus chooses to engage with her as a human being, to share with her his true identity as the Messiah who is to come, to lay aside prejudice and hostility in favour of inclusion and acceptance.

Our reading from Romans declares, "*While we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly.*" Through this ultimate act of loving sacrifice, Paul tells us, he has reconciled us with God – and therefore, we too must be reconciled with one another, with those human beings in whom we see the image of God. Yet, although for centuries, Christians have followed the teachings of Christ, and millions will have read the story of Jesus' interaction with the woman at the well, how many take directly from it the teaching that we too are called to engage with love and understanding with people who embody our own prejudices and those of our society? I can recall my early fears and prejudices about particular groups or individuals brought about by shocking images in the newspaper or on television, which I later found only told a very small part of the story, but which I had to work hard to root out in favour of compassion and understanding.

All of us have prejudices; it is quite likely we have no idea where they came from, whether from the way we were brought up, or taught, or perhaps a single image or comment in the media which has imprinted itself on our unconscious brain, and many of them today may, if we face them and think about them honestly, be connected with those very same issues present in today's Gospel – nationality, race, faith, gender or sexual morality. We see across today's world, and in this country, people who appear to be being de-humanised by the deep-seated prejudices and fears of others.

Yet the message of today's Gospel is abundantly clear; Jesus sets us an example of inclusion, of love, of listening to others and reaching out to them, and of sharing with them the story of God's unending love and mercy for everyone made in his image.

Amen