

St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore

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ENCOUNTERS WITH JESUS – WOMAN AT THE WELL

28th February 2016

Psalm 139:1-12

John 4:1-26

O Lord we sang in the Psalm, *you search me and you know me, all my thoughts lie open to your gaze. When I walk or lie down you are before me: ever the maker and keeper of my days.*

It is a beautiful Psalm and the words we used and the tune we sang them to are serene and lovely, calming and reassuring. But is God's deep knowledge of you always a calm and re-assuring thing? Is it not more often that we react to God's knowledge the way that the woman at the well reacted to Jesus?

Jesus and the woman were alone at their encounter. There is a place for meeting with God in a crowd, we are in that place this morning, you might say! There is a place for hearing what Jesus has to say and being able to discuss it with others or see how others react to it, a place for communal worship of God. Jesus spent much of his time dealing with people in crowds – in the synagogues, on the hillsides, in the streets. But he also had individual meetings with people, sometimes in the midst of the crowd, when the others just faded into the background, and sometimes, as this time, when he could be really alone with the other person. There are times when we need and want to be with others, in God's presence, but even then, there are times when the others can fade away as God deals with us individually. And then there are times when we meet with Jesus alone. And when we do that, as the woman was to discover, there is nowhere to hide.

The encounter begins with Jesus breaking all the taboos and asking her – a woman! And a Samaritan! - for a drink. Already their meeting is on dangerous ground, because Jesus has not observed the protocols. The woman points this out to him. What sort of a person is he that he would set aside all that they both knew about interpersonal relations?

But Jesus is not going to get into these arcane and irrelevant discussions. He won't have long with this woman. It won't take the disciples long to do their errand into the town, and he has work to do here. So he immediately moves the conversation on to offer her his living water.

Living water was an expression that was used to distinguish fresh flowing water, as from a good well or a spring or stream, from dead or stagnant water, from a pond or a polluted source. This well where they met had a pedigree for giving good, living water, as the woman points out to him. It has been doing so reliably since the days of Jacob, who had lived more than a thousand years before. Of course the woman thought that Jesus meant this sort of living water, which is why she queried his lack of a bucket or

anything else to draw up the water with. But Jesus makes it clear he is talking about something else: about a spring of water, gushing up to eternal life.

We are used to seeing waters gushing – think of the Calder or the Pattack, even when they are not in spate there are the many beautiful places where the water is forced between the rocks and foams and roars, and tumbles in undying profusion. We live in a wet land! But if you live in a dry land, where there are few rivers, where streams are dried up as often as not, where dust gets up your nose and between your toes and it is hard to stay feeling clean for any length of time, then the idea of a spring of water gushing up to eternal life – never going dry – would be not only incredibly appealing, but also incredibly refreshing.

Just think how it would be, to never be thirsty, to never feel dirty, to be always refreshed and clean and whole. Oh, but when we start thinking about that then we know that we are moving away from the realms of the physical and the literal, to the spiritual. And that is fine, that is good, we like dealing with the spiritual. Sometimes we have a whole language to do that, in which we talk about sin and sanctification and so on.

But Jesus is not going to do that, either. Yes, he is offering something which, for this woman, is beyond her knowledge, but it is not simply a matter of wafting words. Like everything that is spiritual, it is rooted and has consequences for real lives in the real world.

So he tells the woman to get her husband. Bang. He has hit the nail on the head. He has found her tender, her vulnerable spot. She will talk religion till the cows come home – and in fact we see her trying to do this again later – but she doesn't want to talk about that. You search me and you know me, says the Psalm. But what if that knowledge is uncomfortable? What if Jesus wants to talk about the thing that you would rather never think about, even privately?

"I have no husband," she says. Which is true. When we meet with God we have to tell him the truth. But it is not the whole truth, and Jesus knows it. When we meet with God, he has this habit of getting right to the root of the matter which we are trying not to deal with. This woman had a poor track record in marriage, and was then living outside of marriage with someone. This meant that several times, if not all five times, a man had found her to be an unsatisfactory wife, and that she now had such low self-esteem that she didn't care if her actions put her beyond the pale in society.

You see, God knows us. He sent Jesus to show how well he knows us by his living as one of us. He knows us and he loves us. The things which we try to hide from ourselves, never mind from other people are not things which make him turn from us in disgust, even if we live with self-disgust or with the mockery or accusation of others. God is never disgusted by us, but he does want to help us clean up the mess in our lives, to purify the dirty bits and to heal all our brokenness. And to do that, he has to help us name our deepest shameful things before him.

One of the themes of the novel we are studying this Lent is that we need to confront the very parts of our lives that we would rather forget or run away from, if we are to know the full love of God for us. That is easy to say. We can all talk about the general need for us to do this. We know that it is not just a Spiritual truth, but a psychological necessity if we are to be whole and rounded people. Generalities are easy. But what if it is that secret shame you have been carrying from childhood? What if it is the belief

you have lived with for decades, that somehow you caused your parents' marriage to break up? What if it is the appalling nick-name that people gave you in primary school, which led you to despise yourself forevermore? What if it is something that you did, or something that you still do, that you would rather die than have anyone know about?

The woman did what many of us do: she tried to hide in religious discussion and controversy. She harked back to the ancient disagreements between the Jews and the Samaritans. And Jesus tells her that they don't matter. What matters is that people worship God in Spirit, and in truth. In truth. The thing that we would rather run from when it is the truth about ourselves. The thing we need to look at with Jesus, with the eyes of his love for us if we are to see it as it really is – forgiven, dealt with, polished and made holy by Jesus' forgiving love and death for us.

The woman has one last try – the Messiah will tell us all things when he comes, she says and Jesus gives her no way out – “I am he,” he says “The one who is speaking to you.” This kind of encounter with our inner selves is part of what it means when Jesus proclaimed that he is the truth. He is the one who will show us the truth about ourselves, and show that, in his love for us, it is not the horror that we fear it is.

In the season of Lent, we are slowly but surely approaching the cross, and the commemoration of Jesus' death, which was the culmination of his life of ministry. He died, as the old hymn says that we might be forgiven, he died to make us good. But he can only forgive us and restore us, make us whole and good, and it is good in that sense that this hymn means. It is good in the sense of a fruit being good, not diseased or rotten, not in a moral sense. And Jesus can only make us good if we allow him to confront in us the things we would rather never think about. And if, like that woman, we try to run from his encounter, then what in fact we are doing is allowing Jesus to have died in vain. Because that is why he died. If we won't allow his love to deal with our lives, to illumine our dark places, to help us face our fears and failures and then move beyond them, then there is little point in our commemorating Jesus' death or celebrating his resurrection.

In my last parish, a mother once stopped me and said that she didn't blame me (which was nice) but I should know that since I had said something in a school assembly about God always watching over us – a thought which I hoped would be comforting to children in their many fears – her little girl didn't want to go to the toilet at night! It was private and she didn't want anyone seeing her (I don't know why this was just at night, though it is just as well it was!). Maybe many of us have similar, if slightly more sophisticated reactions to the idea of God's knowledge of us. How dare he know our secrets, and knowing them, how can he love us?

If there is one thing about God which is true, it is that God is love and that his love for us, and for each one of us is boundless. God watching everything we do, if we trust in his love for us, means the end of fear and end of shame and the end of the need to be always thinking about ourselves so that we can be sure that we are hiding the wrong things properly. As we continue our journey towards the cross, may we learn the liberation of God's loving knowledge, and the joy of forgiveness and having our lives made new in the light of God's love for us. Amen