

**Sermon at the Eucharist at Holy Trinity
on Sunday 15 March 2020 at 10 am**

Exodus 17 v.1-7

John 4 v.5-26

May I speak in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Twenty years ago, to this very day, I preached a sermon for the first time. Here, at Holy Trinity. It wasn't very good, but that's not the point. I had broken my duck. And that was important, as three weeks later I was to attend the Bishop's Advisory Panel for them to decide whether to recommend I be trained for the priesthood. With that hurdle passed, I told my family and friends. There was general puzzlement at the news, but pleasure, and from my oldest friends an ironical amusement as they delightedly recollected memories of my late teens and twenties. Except, except for two friends, who were horrified. One was a former Roman Catholic who had been educated by the Irish Christian Brothers; the other was a Northern Irish Protestant. For both of them, coming from different backgrounds and with differing perspectives, my vocation demonstrated a loss of rationality and an acceptance of bigotry and blind unseeing partiality. Their experience, their intelligence, and the history of the society in which they had been brought up, formed their understanding.

I was taken aback that a belief in Christ and a vocation to the priesthood was not seen as embracing the love of God and the source of life, was not seen as embracing constant renewal, and the hope and promise of eternal life. Perhaps I shouldn't have been surprised. Societies coalesce and form around faiths or secular concepts, which embrace and include those on the inside, and reinforce their identity by excluding the 'other', the outsider. Even for those who believe, who are on the inside, there are moments of critical doubt and challenge, especially when life is proving very difficult. That is what is happening in the story from Exodus, when the Israelites demand of Moses that he give them water to drink, and question 'Is the Lord among us or not?'

How do we assure the world that the Lord is indeed among us in the profoundest sense, without implying the gospel is only for those who fully believe, is only for those who conform to the Church's requirements, is only for those already on the inside, and is not for those who are tentatively on the way of faith?

Well, let us explore the story of Jesus's conversation with the Samaritan woman at the well to see how Jesus tackles the encounter with the outsider, the 'other'. The people of Samaria in the eyes of the Jews were the 'other', despite being descended from ten of the twelve tribes of Israel. They were the 'other', because they had separated from the people of Judah after king Solomon's death, because they had later been conquered by the Assyrians and dispersed throughout the Assyrian empire, because the survivors had intermarried with the peoples from foreign lands who had been forcibly transplanted to Samaria, because they only valued the first five books of the Hebrew Bible, the Torah, and not the prophets or the psalms, and because they regarded Mount Gerizem as the holy mountain, not Mount Zion.

As a Jewish rabbi, Jesus would have been expected to take the long route around Samaria so as to avoid being polluted by contact with the Samaritans. Jesus deliberately chose the direct route and deliberately chose contact with the impure, the 'other'. In conversation with the woman at the well he either ignores or marginalises all the differences.

As a Jewish rabbi Jesus was also expected to have no conversation in public with a woman, let alone a Samaritan woman, let alone a woman with a complicated personal history, let alone a solitary woman. Jesus deliberately breaks all these taboos. Why? To what purpose?

The answer, I believe, is to strip bare the essential truth of faith in God and its transformative impact on all of us, irrespective of gender or race, denomination or nationality, age or condition in society. Their conversation is adult, exploratory, and infused with good listening, with profound and key declarations:

‘Those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty.’

This gift of the Holy Spirit to sustain us, to refresh us, to make us constantly anew, will also define us, define us as children of God. We need no other definition. The conversation with the Samaritan woman at the well is so exciting because Christ dumps all accretions, all other aspects of our person – our wealth, our age, our gender, our ethnicity, and focuses incandescently on our soul and our relationship with God. For in the encounter of the human and the divine, all are one in Christ Jesus. Our faith in our redeeming Christ gives us a new and very simple and pure identity, full of grace and truth.

Over the centuries human society has overlain that profound simplicity with many layers. Do we as followers of Christ prefer to identify ourselves by sect or denomination, Orthodox or Catholic, Catholic or Protestant, Anglican or Methodist, and so on and so forth? Or do we wish to ignore faith and define our identity by nationality, and if so how particular do we wish to be? British, or English, Welsh, Irish, Scots?

Or by race and ethnicity? Have you ever had to fill in one of those ethnicity forms? The permutations are endless and I am often tempted to write ‘none of the above’. This is not a flippant response. I know that we perceive these granulations of identity as helpful and necessary to achieve an ordered and purposeful society with a sense of its own identity. But all these classifications of identity diminish us. Diminish us because we are led by them into opposition with each other. Today, people in the Middle East are killing each other over issues of identity.

Questions of particular identity diminish us in another, more insidious way. Inside the lager of our self-identity we become incapable of carrying another person’s cross. Confined in our self-identity we are not ready to bear another’s burden. Of course we go to extraordinary lengths to succour and support those whom we love, but that is not the point, for in our identity as followers of Christ, Christ calls us to acts of self-giving, acts of loving service **for others**. Jesus says to the Samaritan woman at the well,

‘The water that I will give **will become in them** a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.’

In 1914, Shirley Williams' mother, Vera Brittain, was eighteen, and as war was declared she was about to go up to Oxford. Four years later her life, and the life of her whole generation, had changed profoundly. She wrote an autobiography, *Testament of Youth*, in which she describes the bereavements, the death of friends, of her brother, of the man she loved. Her response to all the suffering was to go out to the Western Front to nurse the injured and the dying in the field hospitals. Vera Brittain and many other women came in from the country of their self-identity, journeyed into a land of great pain, and offered their service to strangers who were suffering, whatever their station in life, whatever their nationality, be they ally or enemy.

Some themselves were killed or injured. All were changed. All had accepted the call from Christ to live a life of loving service, to give of themselves, to become for others 'a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.' Our calling, in our own time and our own contexts, is nothing less than to do and be the same for those around us. Amen.