

## Finding our True Worth

If Jesus was around today I am positive he would be using Facebook, Snap Chat, Twitter and Instagram. He was so good at communicating. He used every means to communicate and he would have used Facebook, I am sure. He was a great socialiser too. Reflecting on Jesus' various encounters with people is very interesting but, I think, Jesus' encounter with the woman at Jacob's Well, recorded in John's Gospel Chapter 4, is one of the most fascinating. It would have gone viral, on the Internet, within seconds!! Jesus risked so much to talk to the Samaritan woman. Jewish men would never allow themselves to be alone to talk to a woman. And this woman was a Samaritan. A woman and a Samaritan! Jews would not lower themselves to talk to, let alone drink with a Samaritan. Yet Jesus asks the woman for a drink. Here she was, a woman with a past littered with bad man-relationships and Jesus knows it. The outcast woman had gone to the well. Here she meets someone who wants to talk to her! When the astonished disciples return from town they can't help showing their displeasure. They condemn him. So too does everyone else. The woman, herself, is amazed by it all. Imagine the impact on Facebook and Twitter!

But Jesus sees a person whose personal relationships were in a mess – a person whose life, below the surface, had been torn apart. Reaching out to this lonely Samaritan woman Jesus breaks all the rules and opens a door seemingly locked for years by Jewish tradition, all for a Samaritan woman of dubious repute- leaving himself open to malicious gossip and condemnation – even the woman found this hard to accept.

The Gospel today relays people's early, cynical criticisms of Jesus. His ministry had begun promisingly. His message was positive, people were interested. This changed when he returned to Nazareth. "Where did he get all this? What wisdom is this that has been given to him? How does he perform miracles? Isn't he the carpenter, the son of Mary? Don't we know his brothers and sisters?" In his home town people seemed suspicious and offended, not full of awe and wonder. Jesus was JUST a carpenter! Here was THE local carpenter starting to travel around the country, teaching crowds of thousands and working miracles, convincing people about the Kingdom of God, even that he is the Messiah, the Son of God. You can sense the people's hatred and jealousy grow; you can taste the bitter taste of resentment and rejection.

People thought they had Jesus figured out. He was a simple carpenter – nothing more! Yet no one had a clue about Jesus. Mark often points out that the disciples, who were with him day and night for 3 years, showed they did not know Jesus so how could his family, friends and neighbours know him? Maybe they thought Jesus as delusional, getting above his station in life. Maybe it was jealousy. Whatever, they rejected him. Jesus could have gone back to the workshop. But he didn't. He knew there was God's work to do. But people wanted to limit Jesus in what he could say and do. No carpenter was going to change their comfortable world.

But Jesus did want to change people's lives. He wanted to include everyone and he saw the potential to do God's work in everyone, irrespective of religion, culture, social class and past histories. He put no limits on anyone. Quite the opposite - he showed that both God's grace and his love were limitless. He showed, too, that there

are no limits or boundaries for us in expressing God's love and service to others.

To do this we need confidence in our own faith, confidence in ourselves and in what we can do. In the story the woman tries to divert Jesus' attention; she didn't want to face up to herself, amazed that Jesus knew so much about her, that he talked to her and that he saw her as she truly was. Here lay the challenge for the Samaritan woman. What Jesus saw in the woman, who believed herself to be a lonely, despised, social and emotional wreck, was an opportunity for **her** to serve God? She could hardly be described as a spiritual role model. An hour or so before the encounter with Jesus, the woman is an outcast, totally submerged by her own guilt and dubious past. Now she is an evangelist among the Samaritans. While the disciples stand around motionless and critical, she began her work for God. She started telling people about Jesus. People, hearing what she had to say, came to hear for themselves and were convinced by what Jesus had to say. I am reminded of St Paul's words in our reading this morning. God's answer to his question was: 'my grace is all you need, for my power is greatest when you are weak.' Paul goes on to say, in the strongest possible terms, 'I am most happy, then, to be proud of my weaknesses, in order to feel the protection of Christ's power over me. I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and difficulties for Christ's sake. For when I am weak, then I am strong.'

W Scott McPheat, in his book, *Coping with Life*, writes: 'Jesus says to us, in effect: Accept yourself as God accepts you; be yourself, love yourself properly. Take off your dark coloured glasses and see yourself not as superior or inferior to anyone else, but as you, a person who matters. You were not meant to go through life on your hands and knees, you were meant to walk tall. You are more significant, stronger, wiser and more creative than you think. I am with you to help you and to give you life to the full.' St Augustine said: 'God loves you as though you are the only person in the world, and he loves everyone the way he loves you.' Paul, in Romans, encourages us to 'know ourselves' and by knowing ourselves we will know our worth. If we recognise our true worth, there is no excuse but to get on with God's work.

A father and mother send their son, Michael, to a special tutor because he's falling behind in school. After weeks of personal classes and hundreds of pounds, the parents ask the tutor for a progress report. "Good news", the tutor tells them, over the phone, "your son is getting straight As." "That's outstanding!" says the father. "I'll say," the tutor replies, "I think we're finally ready to move on to the letter B."

Michael, struggling onto the letter B, would struggle to be accepted in society. But in his upside-down world, Jesus has other ideas. His meeting with the Samaritan woman, at the well, shows that the love of God does not depend on what we have achieved, how much we are accepted by society, how significant we are viewed by others, or how we view ourselves. Speaking to and drinking with the Samaritan woman he showed us, when we come to realise we are significant, loved, accepted by God for who we are, this should give us confidence to go and achieve things. Quite contrary to our world where achievement almost always comes before acceptance.

Tony Campolo in his book, *Let Me Tell You a Story* relates the time when he was a counsellor at an American junior-high camp. He realized that boys, at these camps, have a strange, often cruel sense of humour. They pick on unfortunate, off-beat kids and ridicule them. While he was there they picked on Billy, who couldn't walk or talk

properly. He sort of dragged himself everywhere and had a stutter. On the day Billy's cabin had been assigned to lead morning devotions they voted Billy to be the speaker, to get him up in front of everybody to entertain them as he struggled to say anything at all. Somehow, Campolo writes, Billy dragged himself up onto the rostrum accompanied by a wave of sniggers from the audience. It took Billy almost a minute to say, 'Je—sus...loves ...me....and....I....love Je—sus.' When he finished there was stunned silence. There were tears streaming down boys' faces, many had their heads bowed. In that week, Campolo notes, nothing had worked to reach the boys with the gospel, until this 13 year-old physically disabled lad displayed his love for Christ and everything changed. Others had been trying to define Billy, limit his expectations, judge him, control him! But Billy felt loved and he wanted the world to know it.

Jesus invites us to offer him a drink, just as he did the Samaritan woman. What we do with that invitation is our challenge? The woman found out Jesus does not define us in terms of our past, or even in terms of who we are now. He sees the people we can be and in what we can do. What we do will depend on how we see our true worth in the eyes of God. God believes you and me to be truly significant. He accepts us, holds us in his love and showers us with his grace. It is for us to get on and do something!

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8/7/18