

### A LENT 3 2020

There is much happening in this Gospel, perhaps the most powerful and complex narrative in the entire Gospels. But there is just one I want to underline today, because this is the story of an isolated woman, who comes to the well at noon. We are a species that longs to be together, and even now in some cultures, the well is still the place to gather and laugh and talk - just a few years ago we were in a town in Umbria where a stream had been diverted into a washhouse and women were pounding their clothes on stone benches – a page that could be lifted out of the history of any century. We need to gather, and we love to do that around water: pools and lakes and rivers and beaches are still some of the most significant sites of social interaction. But everyone else comes in the early hours of the morning or the late afternoon, when fresh water is most needed, not the middle of the day. If you've spent a summer in a hot climate, you know you don't go anywhere in the middle of the day. This is a woman who has not chosen isolation but who has had it chosen for her: her multiple marriages have torn the fabric of very small community and so she is shunned and excluded, not to be trusted. And yet she is really just another icon of suffering humanity, of every one of us who has been expelled for any reason, things we have done and things over which we have had no control - gender, race, sexuality, illness, disability, past mistakes.

And yet despite her choices, and the choices made about her by others, Jesus finds her. Isn't that the good news we need to hear? I don't know how the next days and weeks and months will play out – things change so rapidly just in the course of one day. There are very few things about which we can be certain, but there is this, that the Jesus who found this woman at the well, who found the young man condemned to live alone in the caves of Gerasa, that Jesus will find you and me; the One who looks into our souls, knows us to our very core, who understands and loves and forgives, and who will not abandon us.

No wonder this woman runs into town and announces “Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done – could he be the Messiah?” This, surely, is one of our deepest desires, to have someone look into the depths of our heart and to know, to know what we have suffered and lost, the terrible mistakes we've made and the people we have hurt and betrayed, and ‘to know’ with kindness and acceptance and compassion, to respect, even to show reverence. This is the story of so many other reviled and outcast people who, like her, have come to believe - not because of miracles of healing and multiplication, but simply because Jesus – and those who, like us, love him and follow him - found them, and stayed with them, eating their food and sharing their homes, listening, understanding, looking into their hearts and recognizing their goodness and their pain.

It seems to me that this is perhaps the most powerful witness we can give both as individuals and as a community to the Lordship of Christ - by creating and preserving holy spaces, where we listen and regard and forgive and understand. And now we now have to imagine an entirely different way of doing that, at least for the time being, because this remains our deepest need and our most urgent

calling. Every one of us needs to somehow touch the hem of the garment, to catch a glimpse of the face, to brush the fingertips of our Savior, to know we are on holy ground.

St John carefully notes that the woman leaves her water jar; she has just said to Jesus “Give me this water always so I won’t have to come back here,” and so he does: she knows that she will not need her water jar again, now she has tasted the living water, she has been seen and heard and loved, and her entire life is transformed. This is the good news whose ministers we are: that our God is not out to embarrass or expose us, that God knows us to our very sinews and yet delights in us, and that to be known by God is joy and freedom.

We have gathered here week after week to be reminded of covenant and faithfulness, the reliability of God's mercy, of God's victory and God's acceptance, and although the way we do that will change, the purpose remains the same: to have reliably placed before us that Christ who knows everything we have ever done, everything we are and want, and who is still our resurrection and our life, our healing and our reconciliation, who having found us, will never abandon us.