

Context is everything!

All our readings this morning focus in on “sin” – “going astray”, “making a mistakes” which is quite an appropriate theme for Lent. In the readings we see a spectrum of sinning, from wrong actions such as making a mistake –grumbling, lacking trust : which we see in Exodus; to a state of being – our inability to perfect ourselves: in our Romans reading. And then, in our Gospel account from John, a conversation that goes before the concept of sin by immersing us fully in the loving purposes of God.

But if Christ is calling us to let go of the past and take his guiding hand to walk into the future there is a part of us, part of our human nature which sometimes gets mixed up or confused with our concept of sin and can lead to guilt or a fear of looking within ourselves to find Christ, our inner teacher. Also, our “drives” govern our appetites which exist to ensure our survival. And they can be powerful in the way they influence or even direct our lives and its impossible to excise them from us, however hard we may try. There is a dark side to each appetite which instead of protecting us can actually ruin us. Chief amongst our appetites are hunger, thirst and sex. And all three of our readings say something about them but I’m going to home in on our Gospel account as it says something about all three.

However, to try and get the most from Jesus’ encounter with the Samaritan woman, we need to stand back and understand the context in which it is written.

In order to understand complex situations, we frequently employ metaphors or analogies to help us. “it was like” or “imagine this”. We use them all the time, some to very humorous effect. But get your analogy wrong and you can get yourself in very hot water as we have seen this last week and I hope you enjoyed Match of the Day last night.

But those analogies can and will break down if the analogy employed no longer makes sense to the audience or if it takes the focus away from the point being made.

A couple of examples spring to mind. Now if you are of a certain age, you may remember the Secret Policeman’s Ball which was a series of benefit shows held in the 1980s on behalf of Amnesty International with all the big names of comedy of the time. One of them - Peter Cook is to be seen summing up as the Very Biased Judge, parodying and mercilessly satirising a very high-profile case of the day. If you listen to it you can hear the audience falling about in laughter because they understood perfectly who the Judge was that PC was ridiculing. But, as you listen to it today can you remember who he was and which trial it related to or if you are the same age as that audience today would you know who he was alluding to. It’s still very funny though. [Sir Joseph Cantley, the presiding *judge* at the 1979 Jeremy Thorpe trial]

Another example, of a more literary vein relates to the writings of Shakespeare. He lived at a time of religious ferment as the country switched from being a catholic to a protestant country with violent repercussions for anyone adhering to the wrong side of the argument or not following the party line. Shakespeare absorbed his experience of living in such time and used it to great effect in his writings. He would use words carefully to avoid censorship from the Lord Chamberlain but the insinuations or allusions he was making would have been readily understood for his audiences. But for us and for students of his works, these carefully constructed insinuations and allusions need to be explained, teased apart to ensure comprehension of what Shakespeare is saying and to understand the world that he inhabited and the constraints he had to work with.

So, with that appreciation, we now look at our encounter between Jesus and the Samaritan woman. Because, in simply reading the passage through there is much we can miss

because we are not 1st century Christians. I suppose the question we can ask is - does it matter? Well, I think the answer has to be 'yes' otherwise we will fail to pick up and appreciate the important points Jesus is trying to get across to us.

There are in fact a number of points in this account that are 'wrong' and they all matter. But they don't look odd to us which is why they need explained for us to know what is wrong and to see how it would have looked to anyone at the time it was written.

The starting point is that Jesus was already known as a holy man, leader of a movement to bring Israel back to God. John's readers knew that Jesus was more than that but we need to learn to think with the minds of his followers at the time.

In that culture many devout Jewish men would not have allowed themselves to be alone with a woman. And if that was unavoidable then they most certainly would not have spoken with her. They would have considered the risk of doing so as too high – risk of impurity, risk of gossip and risk ultimately of being drawn into immorality. And yet here is Jesus both in the company of a woman and talking with her. Not surprisingly when his disciples return "they were astonished".

The next point is that this woman is a Samaritan. Ever since some of the Jewish exiles returned from Babylon to find the central section of their ancient territory occupied by a group who claimed to be the true descendants of Abraham and opposing their return, there had been constant trouble. Trouble had frequently descended into skirmishes, bloodshed and murder. But most of the time they just chose not to mix. The Jews would have nothing to do with them and certainly would not share eating and drinking vessels. And yet Jesus is asking this woman for a drink!

The third point which compounds the first two is that the woman is 'a bad sort', a woman of bad character. We are told that Jesus arrived at the well at noon. That was an unusual time of day to come and draw your water. The usual time would be at the cooler time of day, most likely first thing in the morning or late in the afternoon. The reason for coming at noon would be to avoid meeting anyone or at least anyone who knew her, her past, her immorality. The last thing she would have wanted would be to rub shoulders with the other women of the town and they would have felt the same about her. Jesus will presently show that he knows all about this and yet he engages her in conversation and one that has a teasing, double-meaning flavour to it.

These multiple meanings are, as we shall see, typical of the kind of conversation that John reports. Again and again in John's gospel Jesus talks to people who misunderstand what he says. He is talking at the heavenly level and they are listening at the earthly level. But because the one God created both heaven and earth and because the point of Jesus' work is precisely to bring the life of heaven to earth, the misunderstandings are, in that sense, 'natural'. Jesus asking for a drink, tells the woman that *she* should have asked *him* for one. She, of course, thinks he is talking in the ordinary sense of being thirsty and needing a drink.

The clue that he doesn't is found in the phrase '*living water*'. That's the regular phrase people used in Jesus' world for what we call 'running' water. The water we find in streams, rivers or indeed, for us, from our taps. Water that is more likely to be fresh and clean rather than standing around to become stagnant. But here the double meaning kicks in because, of course, Jesus is not referring to physical water whether it be still or moving. He is referring to the new **life** that he is offering to anyone: as this conversation shows, anyone at all, no matter who or what they are.

What Jesus is saying about 'living water' makes it clear that he's talking about something quite different, something for which all the water on earth is just a signpost, a pointer. Not only will the water he is offering quench your thirst so that you'll never be thirsty again. It will become a spring bubbling up inside you, refreshing you with new life which is coming into the world with Jesus and which is the life of the whole new world God is making. [verse 14]. Later on in chapter 7 Jesus will say something like this again which John explains as referring to the spirit. But in this passage the reference remains cryptic and puzzling.

But its enough for the woman. She doesn't know exactly what he's talking about but she wants to know more. What other meanings she may have been thinking of, we don't know. She is curious. But she is in for a shock, along with the rest of us. Jesus has living water to offer right now but taking it will change every aspect of one's life. In accepting it the stale, mouldy stagnant water will go. And that's the situation with the woman. Jesus has seen her immoral lifestyle. She indeed has no husband but instead is living with a man. We don't know why – divorce, widowhood, abandonment; whatever the reason whether victim or offender she was judged by the society around her as a 'bad-un' and to be avoided.

Jesus knew but when the nub of the issue is raised, she starts talking about something else, deflecting the conversation back to religion and the differences between Samaritans and Jews and their separate history.

But of course, these are excuses. As far as God is concerned, its irrelevant which church you belong to because as Jesus emphasises here, the true and living God isn't contained geographically or architecturally. He is spirit: the kind that transcends the physical world.

This last week outside Boots in Beaconsfield were a couple handing out a book 'The Great Controversy' focusing in on everything that the author saw as wrong with the papacy and the couple described themselves as Protestants rather than Christians. The phrase from Matthew: "you hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye" sprang to mind. If you focus in on differences between different Christian denominations then you have totally missed the point.

But this conversation with Jesus was all too much for the woman and she probably didn't enjoy Jesus reinforcing the message that 'salvation comes from the Jews' (v22) but then she probably couldn't comprehend that true worship would one day have nothing to do with territory and everything to do with spirituality and truth.

As with the woman caught in adultery in chapter 8 of John, Jesus does not condemn the woman. John shows how Jesus manages our going astray. He tries her with a question, which gives her options in replying: she can tell the truth; she can conceal the truth; or she can justify the truth.

The woman chooses the right answer: to tell the truth. And then Jesus reveals that he knew the answer already. So, why ask? Surely the explanation has to be because he is giving her a chance (he is always giving us chances) to be honest about herself. Little wonder that she goes home saying that he told her everything she ever did.

And, this is the bit we can easily overlook and which I find the most fascinating – this woman who everyone wants to avoid – returns to the city and says to people "come and see" and "many Samaritans from that city believed in Jesus because of the woman's testimony". And not only that but because of what she said they invited this Jew into their homes and listened to his message: "it is no longer because of what you said (the woman) for we have heard for ourselves and we know that this is truly the Saviour of the world'. Those three simple words

“come and see” beckon us forward to go deeper to the fountain of living water that alone can sustain and nurture us for all eternity. And, that call can come from anyone! Amen