

## **The Bounds of Love**

### **Lent III Year A**

#### **Benefice**

#### **Readings**

Ex 17:1-7

Rom 5:1-11

John 4:5-42

+ *In Nomine*

This morning's Gospel is set deep in foreign territory. Jesus is travelling through Samaria and this was a dangerous route as hatred between Jews and Samaritans was fierce and longstanding. It probably dated back to the Patriarchs when Jacob gave his favourite son Joseph the fertile land around the area of Jacob's well. It eventually became the northern kingdom of Israel, which in turn became Samaria. After Israel was divided into two kingdoms, Israel and Judah, the Assyrians captured Israel and enslaved much of the population. They then repopulated the land with Gentile colonists worshipping pagan idols. The remaining Jews began to intermarry with the newcomers and to worship idols alongside God. Though the southern kingdom, Judah also fell to the Assyrians with people exiled in captivity, a 'remnant' was allowed to return to Judah and rebuild the temple some 70 years later. These did not intermarry or worship Gentile idols. Enmity grew bitter between Judah and Samaria and was entrenched by Jesus' time. They regarded each other as heretic and apostate. I'm not giving you

a history lesson to bore you all rigid but to demonstrate just how close – ethnically and historically – these two ‘enemies’ actually were.

Jesus turns up at Jacob’s well tired, thirsty in the hottest part of the day. A Samaritan woman comes to draw water. Jesus asks her to give him a drink. This is an astounding. Jewish men were not permitted to interact with women outside their family, nor were they permitted to interact with the hated Samaritans. It’s interesting that it is the woman who draws attention to the connection between them – ‘our ancestor Jacob’. She accepts that there is common ground between Jews and Samaritans despite the historical enmity and later in verse 25 acknowledges that the promise of the Messiah is for all. In revealing himself to be that very Messiah who is the Saviour of the World, the one who offers that living water – the grace to worship of God in Spirit and in Truth in fellowship with all believers – Jesus smashes those human barriers – barriers of ethnicity, religiosity and gender that polarize people and create a climate where love cannot flourish.

Jesus appears to be breaking Jewish law right left and centre. He is fraternizing with a woman and a ‘sinful’ woman to boot – one that the church these days might describe as living in an ‘irregular relationship’. She is a Samaritan – an apostate shunned by law abiding Jews. And in the end it is the Samaritans en mass who are ‘converted’, initially through the woman’s testimony which encourages them to come and listen to Jesus for

themselves. And in verse 41 we are told that *many believed because of his word*. Meanwhile those closest to Jesus simply don't 'get' it. They don't understand that Jesus is doing the Father's will in drawing all people – **all people** – to himself so that they can share in that living water, that eternal life which God has promised to **all** who believe. Jesus is not **breaking** the law in any way – overturning convention yes, but he does this to **fulfill** the law. And what is this fulfilling of the Law? Nothing less than holding fast to the first two commandments:

*Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your might and love your neighbour as yourself.* And of course you will all recall the famous question put to Jesus by the lawyer in Luke's Gospel – and who is my neighbour? At the end the lawyer admits through gritted teeth – **the one who showed mercy** for the one who showed mercy was none other than the Samaritan – the outsider.

As I look at the recent shenanigans within the Church of England, I have difficulty in seeing one jot of that abundant love of Jesus poured out for all in the many apparatchiks who claim to 'speak' in His name.

The fury whipped up by so called 'liberals' over the appointment of the traditionalist Bishop of Burnley, Philip North to the see of Sheffield is perhaps the most prominent case in point. The Act of Synod enabling women's consecration to the Episcopate that was

passed over two years ago, was predicated by an undertaking to respect and honour the 'flourishing' of all within the Church. The Archbishops made it clear that ours is a Church for all. **All**, actually was meant to include **everyone**, not just the people one happens to agree with! A set of 'guiding principles' were meant to ensure equal opportunity for men and women, traditionalist and liberal with regard to Episcopal appointments. The Church has since rejoiced to see a number of women consecrated as suffragan and diocesan bishops.

Apparently in that way of semantics peculiar to the English, 'all' doesn't actually mean 'all'. It really means the people you agree with. When Bishop Philip – and yes, he's a 'traditionalist' - accepted the nomination for Sheffield he had much to say to the people of that Diocese, male and female, clergy and laity, traditionalist and liberal. I quote:

*I know that there will be those who for theological reasons will have misgivings about this appointment. I want to make it absolutely clear that I am utterly determined to be a Bishop for all, and will love, care for, appoint and develop the ministry of all clergy, female or male, Catholic, Evangelical and all points in between. **Anyone who has a passion for Jesus Christ and who longs to make new disciples in his name will find a warm and equal welcome in this Diocese...***

*Trust is something that needs to be earned, and I would ask you*

*fervently to give me the chance to do that. In a horribly divided world where politics seems to grow uglier and more divisive by the day, the Anglican commitment to mutual flourishing gives us a golden opportunity to model for the nation unity in the midst of diversity. **We can stand against the voices of hatred and intolerance and despair simply through the quality of our own relationships in Christ.** It will be my heartfelt prayer that we can do that here in the Diocese of Sheffield....*

Sadly Bishop North was not given this opportunity. He was shown no mercy but was hounded, his integrity questioned in the nastiest, most vitriolic way, in the press and in a torrent of hate mail. His most hate filled critics were fellow clergy who purport to be 'liberal' – that is supposedly tolerant of diversity! Just over a week ago he withdrew, believing that he could not provide that focus for unity necessary in a Diocesan Bishop. Words from his withdrawal statement may prove prophetic for our Church:

*There is clearly much to be done on what it means to disagree well and to live with theological difference in the Church of England...*

***If, as Christians, we cannot relate to each other within the bounds of love, how can we possibly presume to transform a nation in the name of Christ?***

As one who believes that all people must be equally and warmly welcomed within our Church, I find the treatment of Bishop North by a cadre of so called liberals – ordained and lay, male and female - to be breathtakingly arrogant and not to put too fine a

point on it, demonic. For it to be played out in this season of Lent – of renewal – or turning afresh to Christ and his self emptying love for all people – is nothing short of catastrophic. It has reopened with a vengeance the chasm between traditional and for want of a better word ‘liberal’ Anglicans and unity, mercy and love now seems a long way off. Sadly we shall never know whether or how Bishop North might have fulfilled his promise to be a *Bishop for all*. Such an opportunity may have proved transformative for the Church and for him. In this, the work of the Holy Spirit has been thwarted ...and by the same ‘characters’ as we will find in our reading of the Passion not too many weeks hence. A sobering thought.

In this morning’s Gospel we see Jesus relating within the bounds of love to one who is an ‘outsider’ – a woman and a Samaritan. Through His self revelation, this woman and many others are changed forever – they are truly transformed by the power of love, that ‘living water’, the Grace of God that offers life to all. As Christians we have no choice but to follow our Leader in the challenging but life giving way of loving and respecting those who are different to us. This is what Lent is all about – taking off the blinkers and seeing others as Christ sees them. Those who remain entrenched in their own self righteousness, like the disciples in verses 31-38 sadly fail to ‘get it’ and the Church and society is poorer for their blindness. No wonder the Church is on the back foot. Yes, how CAN we possibly hope to transform a nation in Christ when we show such public hatred towards one of

our own? Something for us all to ponder for the remainder of this Lent. As our Gospel concludes, it was the **outsiders** who were able to say of the Christ who embraced them in love – *This is truly the Saviour of the World.*