

New Kilpatrick

Sermon

John 4:1-30

4th February

Spirit of life... of inclusion... of imagination... may we get tangled up in these three things... in life... in gathering folk and using our imagination... and find in there... the invitation of the kingdom... do to a new thing... in and old world... So be it... Amen

What have wearing black... or pink... #metoo... Presidents Club... formula One and the BBC all got in common?...

Actually... that is not much of a question... because most of us will immediately know the answer... as each has been in the news just this last week... as an example of the disparity between men and women in our culture...

The bigger... more difficult question would be... how many other organisations can we add to that list... because we have been here before... far too often... It is a hundred years since passing the representation of the People Act which gave women the vote...

So why is it only over the last couple of weeks... that Carrie Gracie's resignation from the BBC... actually feel like something has shifted... and made society reflect on its values a bit more... towards women... And the church has not had the most noble history in this area either...

In some places the church has shone a light on inequality... but in many areas... it has been as misogynistic as the rest of the culture of the time... which illustrates perhaps... the difference between religion and faith... religion being the institution with the rules and the authority... faith being the way we live towards our neighbours... and values with which we build relationships...

All of which comes sharply into focus... when we have a story like today... and a messiah like Jesus... who meets someone like this samaritan woman...

The whole setting is all wrong... with a Jew talking to a Samaritan... a man to a woman... Except this is the kingdom of God... and the Kingdom of God was ahead of the game... even way back then...

Now don't imagine everything you read in the Bible is full of the kingdom of God because it isn't... The Bible's stories have been recorded in a way that often leaves women and others... vulnerable... forgotten... and nameless... and it is no secret the Bible has been used time and time again to support inequality not just for women... but children... disabled... foreigners... slaves... and people of various sexuality... very often because we haven't understood the culture... the politics... or the background...

But the thing is... the Bible has an even richer seam of stories that are correctives for us... Whenever we try to put anyone down... be they women or foreigners or lepers or the poor... the Bible offers stories like Jonah... whose sole purpose is to remind the Jews the kingdom is not just for Israel... for it is a sermon-story of the only prophet who took salvation to Nineveh... beyond the cultural, political and religious boundaries of the nation... correctives...

Or vast screeds of prophetic challenges to the nation... when it turned away from focussing on the widows and the poor and vulnerable... How you treat your poor is the measure of the nation says the prophets... correctives...

Or Jesus and the Samaritan woman... Though perhaps it is the case we come to this story with a picture of this Samaritan woman... who has a shady past... is divorced... and most likely a prostitute... Why else is she out in the noonday sun... The preacher... John Piper describes her as "a worldly, sensually-minded, unspiritual harlot from Samaria."...

Sadly this picture is not unusual... but this picture is utter nonsense...

There is nothing in the passage that suggests that... the gospel writer John never mentions it... and Jesus never implies it... Not once does he invite repentance... or speak of sin... or make comment on her lifestyle... except one misleading phrase... about having five husbands... and it seems this is the line everyone readily falls on... that suggests she has not had the most respectable past...

But there are any number of reasons why... She could easily have been widowed or abandoned or divorced... which was pretty much the same thing in the ancient world... Five times is heartbreaking but not impossible... She could have been in what's called a Levirate marriage... where a woman is passed on in marriage to her deceased husband's brothers...

This woman's story not scandalous... it is tragic... yet we tend to presume the former...

Except Jesus doesn't... Jesus has the longest conversation in the Bible... with this heretical... vulnerable... foreign... Samaritan woman... We like finding all the reasons not to respect this woman...

Jesus instead... simply sees her... talks to her... recognises her... This woman... whom the bible fails to name of course... has worth... value... significance... of which she is unaccustomed...

There is something we need to know... however... and that is the whole idea of five husbands... She is a Samaritan... Jews believed they were heretics and worshipped the five foreign gods... That's the metaphor of the five husbands... And the one she is living with while unmarried?... Samaria was seen as partially faithful to the covenant God set up with the Jews...

It's all code... The woman isn't a fallen woman... She understands the metaphor Jesus uses about her husbands... and replies "I see you are a prophet"... Again... code... The whole idea of "seeing" is central in John's gospel... It means... not looking... but believing... "I believe you are a prophet" she says... because Jesus talks of the time when they will be united... and so she runs off to tell her neighbours this good news...

So there is nothing here to suggest we should define her in any negative way... Quite the opposite... but perhaps the reason we have in the past and continue to do so for others... is because it plays into the belief... religion... is chiefly about morality...

The Bible is used... in terms of sin and forgiveness... moral depravity and repentance... and as we grow more fearful towards others the more we moralise...

But that is not what the Bible I read allows us to do... Rather... and this story is case in point... the Bible is not about immorality... It is about identity...

Here Jesus invites the woman not to be defined by her circumstances... but sees her... values her... and invites her... to lift herself above the tragedy that has been her life...

And then the next significant thing happens... She accepts... and she takes on a unique role in Jesus ministry... as the first character in this Gospel to seek out others... and tell them of Jesus... the first missionary...

So folks... let us as a society... and as a church... rise above the moralisation of the Bible... and of our faith... often linked with the demeaning of a particular group in our communities... from misogyny to racism to prejudice... and tell this woman's story... as an example... of what the Bible actually does... and what this particular faith community is doing...

And that is... offering value to folk... and as we continue to evolve as a faith community... and explore ways of adding these values into our local parish in partnership with others... as we develop ways to be a church in community... working alongside others...

Just this week we began exploring a partnership with Citizens Advice Bureau... and the ideas coming from our Strategy Group... our festivals... City Mission night shelter volunteers... and so many other things we have always done... Through these... we meet at today's wells... and give value to all who have found no place they belong... no longer from a moralising standpoint... but towards the more affirming... welcoming... generous kingdom Jesus opened up at that well... in Samaria...

This is the church we continue to grow into... This is the faith we believe in... this is the woman we want to identify with... and this is the saviour we follow... who simply invites us... to open up a conversation... and dares us to come and see...

References

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