

John 4: 5-26

In one of the cheerless novels of Thomas Hardy a simple country girl, good-hearted and pretty, falls in love with a man whose station in life is higher than hers. He is charmed by her and they marry. Then she tells him what she had tried and failed to tell him before: years earlier she had been the victim of a dominant lover and borne his child, a child who had died soon after. "Forgive me!" she cries. And her new husband promptly abandons her. The author's comment is *In considering what Tess was not, he overlooked what she was.*

In considering what Tess was not, he overlooked what she was. Jesus had a conversation by a well; we read part of the story this morning. And the other person in the conversation – well, everyone knew what she was not. You could tell by looking at her that she was not a man. She was the wrong gender. It is difficult for Western people to appreciate how strong was the discrimination against women in ancient times and how strong it was among the people of the Bible. When in our story the woman says to Jesus *How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman?* the reason for her surprise is that she knew well the attitude of Jewish men towards women. Every day in the morning prayer the words were *I thank you God that you have not made me a slave, a Gentile, or a woman.* In most law cases at the time of Jesus the evidence of women was not admissible in court.

I hope our society is less hostile to women. If it is, it has been a long, slow process. When Barbara Castle became Secretary of State for Education in the height of the Swinging Sixties, she toured a factory in her own constituency, where the bosses showed them the pay scales papers: "Managerial, skilled, unskilled, women."

Others at the well would see whom Jesus was talking to and see what she was not. They looked and saw that she was not a man. She herself was surprised that Jesus spoke to her, because she looked at herself and saw what she was not. But Jesus?

Back to Tess's husband. *In considering what Tess was not, he overlooked what she was.* Well. Everyone seeing the two of them would know what else she was not. For she was not a Jew. She was the wrong race. And he was not just talking to her he was asking for a drink from her. To make the point crystal clear the writer of the gospel story goes out of his way to explain *Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.* She is just as surprised herself as she says to Jesus *How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?* Do you remember the morning prayer they used to use *I thank you God that you have not made me a slave, a woman, or a Gentile.* That is, I thank God you have not made me of a different race.

I wish I could see any signs that modern people are less racist. I think of some of the dreadful things that were said on the fringes of the Brexit debate. I think of what is happening in America just now. And I think of a visit I will make next month. Next month I will go to Jerusalem; and while I am there I will visit, as every visitor to Jerusalem should, Yad Vashem. Yad Vashem is Israel's Memorial to the victims of the holocaust, and it is one of the most tragic places in the world. It is tragic for two reasons. Who can not be speechless when confronted with the horror of the racist ideology which led to the cold-blooded murder of six million Jews. Speechless: and thinking of the shame of being part of a human race that did this, and determined again to denounce anti-semitism? But the double tragedy is to think of the racist ideology in that country today – of all countries – which keeps Palestinian people in captivity.

How powerful is the tendency in us all to look at other people and see what they are not: they are not of our race. Everyone looked at the woman and saw a Samaritan. But Jesus....?

Back to Tess's husband. *In considering what Tess was not, he overlooked what she was.* Most of all, when people considered the woman in the story they considered what she was not and they considered most of all that she was not good enough. She is the subject of common gossip. Jesus is able to tell her *You have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband.* Whatever the reasons for the story of her private life she is not talked about as a model of purity. And precisely not the kind of person Jesus should be caught talking to if he was seeking a reputation as a prophet and a man of God. She was not good enough.

In the lifetime of most of us attitudes toward sexual behaviour have changed dramatically. The front page of the magazine my mother used to read was once hearty puddings and knitting: today it is the infidelities of the rich and famous. But we are no less judgmental than our grandparents were. It may not so often be about sex, but there are far too many of us who are prepared to listen to mere tittle-tattle about others, about our politicians, our neighbours, our ministers, our in-laws just so that we can whisper "they are not good enough".

What is more, we keep saying it about ourselves. We know each one of us, that we are not good enough. We acknowledge it in church every Sunday: and to seek forgiveness is good and right. But to hide from challenge and opportunity and commitment because we cannot get past telling ourselves we are not good enough is not healthy, and has diminished many lives. Self-loathing can be very destructive

Other people looked at the woman Jesus met at the well and said "She's not good enough". But Jesus...?

Back to Tess's husband. *In considering what Tess was not, he overlooked what she was.* To everyone else the Samaritan woman was not a man, not a Jew, and not good enough. But Jesus....

Jesus did not consider what she was not. Jesus saw and loved what she was. It is a long conversation by the well: But it is a conversation which breaks down barriers, builds relationships, and never once does Jesus talk down to her. He sees her as she is and he loves her as she is. In our Lent Study Group we came across a verse in the Old Testament; and we will be hearing it again next week in church. In the Old Testament it says *the Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart.* That is exactly Jesus and the woman at the well.

What Jesus sees is not what she is not but what she is. He sees a woman who is searching, who has questions, who is puzzled by religion, who longs to know God. And because he sees her as she is, and listens to her with love, she is able to hear from him the truth about God which is the whole message of Jesus.

The story ends with the woman going back to her own village and telling everyone she meets that she has seen the Messiah. In fact, in John's gospel, she is the very first person in the world ever to preach the good news. Now there is a good question for the Morningside Parish Church Quiz on Saturday. Who is the very first person in the world to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ? The answer is a nameless woman who was despised by everyone except one man. Could it be that Jesus changed her life because, by seeing past what she was not to seeing what she really was, he saw what she might be?

Amen