

“The One who can read me”

Homily for Lent III

March 12 2023

In an East African village, a simple woman always walked around with her bulky Bible. She never was parted from it. So the villagers began to tease her: "Why always the Bible?" they asked. "There are so many other books you could read." Yet the woman kept on living with her Bible, neither disturbed nor angered by all the teasing. But finally one day, she knelt down in the midst of those who laughed at her. She held up the Bible, high above her head, and said with a great smile: "Yes, of course, there are many books which I could read. Yet there is only one book which reads me." Someone else who concurred with this woman was the great Protestant theologian Karl Barth who said:

“I have read many books but the Bible reads me”

The woman who encountered the Lord at Jacob’s well in today’s Gospel ran back to her townsfolk saying the same thing about Jesus.

Come, see a man who told me all that I ever did.

Why was it that Jesus was so able to touch this woman in such a profound way; so that he was able to read her? The Collect we prayed today begins to answer this question. We addressed the Trinity this way:

***Look graciously on this confession of our lowliness,
that we who are bowed down by our conscience
May always be lifted up by your mercy.***

If anyone was bowed down by her conscience it was this woman. Jesus met her in this place of deepest lowliness and lifted her up by his mercy. His mercy touched the four dimensions of her life because he was fully present to her. These four dimensions I will summarize by the use of the acronym PIES.

Jesus was:

Physically present to her;
Intellectually present to her;
Emotionally present to her;
Spiritually present to her.

Physically, intellectually, emotionally and spiritually present in a way that no man had ever been present to her before. Remember back in John 2, Jesus performed a miracle at the Wedding at Cana. Midweek through the celebration the wine had run out. Here was a woman for whom the wine to gladden her heart had turned to sour vinegar. Someone for whom there was no more joy, nothing to celebrate. She had been married five times and now was living with a man who was not her husband. And here before her is He who is the true bridegroom and she is His bride. No

man had ever baked her a pie before. But Jesus does and so changes her life forever as he lifts her up by his mercy.

So let's listen in as Jesus courts with mercy this woman bowed down by rejection and isolation and so discover how Jesus reads her through the eyes of grace-filled love.

Physically present to her:

St. John tells us how Jesus is physically present to her. After a long journey, he arrives at Jacob's well at high-noon. While he is physically tired, thirsty and hungry, his fatigued physical condition does not deter him from being present to this woman.

There came a woman of Samaria to draw water. Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink." 9 The Samaritan woman said to him, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?"

The animosity between the Jews and Samaritans was one of the great ethnic divides of the Middle East of Jesus' time. Not only was there ethnic hatred between these warring ancestors of Abraham, this Samaritan woman was coming to the well in the heat of the day when no other woman was present. In a small town like Sychar, she undoubtedly had a reputation and was the subject of gossip whenever the women gathered around that ancient water cooler - Jacob's Well.

Intellectually present to her:

Jesus is physically present to her by asking her to be physically present to him. He asks for a drink. Notice how his physical presence provides the overture for their minds to engage with one another as Jesus becomes intellectually present to her. The heart of Jesus' encounter with this woman is a playful exchange of ideas about the well and its significance to the Samaritan people. St John gives us insight into this woman's keen and agile mind. Realizing that Jesus should actually be ignoring her, but isn't, this provides her with the opportunity to enter into a conversation with Jesus. Back and forth it goes like a singles tennis game, the ball from one side of the court to the other, our heads turning to the left and to the right as we listen to this playful and yet profound exchange of ideas. She is a woman who knows the story of her people and discerns, as the conversation carries on that Jesus is talking to her by using figurative speech. She also discovers that he is offering an invitation to a kind of thirst quencher she has never before consumed as John tells us:

15 The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water, that I may not thirst, nor come here to draw."

Emotionally present to her:

Having engaged her mind, now Jesus touches her soul, her emotions; the very centre of her being.

16 Jesus said to her, "Go, call your husband, and come here." 17 The woman answered him, "I have no husband." Jesus said to her, "You are right in saying, 'I have no husband'; 18 for

you have had five husbands, and he whom you now have is not your husband; this you said truly.” 19 The woman said to him, “Sir, I perceive that you are a prophet”.

What is Jesus doing here? He so speaks to her that the words cut to her heart. Jesus is able to read something of the soul of this woman. He knows how her heart has been so wounded and rejected..... One man after another. As to why they left her or why she left them, we do not know. What we know is that in response to Jesus’ request: “Go call your husband,” we get to the heart of where her thirst needs to be satisfied.

Here was a woman with such a restless soul, and a life like so many today. From one relationship to the next, looking for that real relationship that will refresh a parched heart. This is the man or woman who will satisfy me. Yet St. John would have us understand something so important. In the end, no human being, however, great they may be can finally satisfy that relational thirst that the eternal bridegroom Jesus Christ can only fulfill.

St. John wants us to see that it is only as we allow Jesus to touch our emotional centre that we can then take the next step and receive what he wants to say to us spiritually.

Spiritually present to her:

Their conversation turns to the topic of where is the place to truly worship God. Is it here in Samaria or down south in Jerusalem? As they exchange words it becomes clear that the true worship of God will no longer be limited to either Samaria or Jerusalem. This leads the woman to ponder,

“I know that Messiah is coming” (who is called Christ). “When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us.” 26 Jesus said to her, “I am he, the one who is speaking to you.”

Where ever the one who says “I am he” is present that is where true worship happens. What Jesus begins to say here about true worship he further develops in John 6, when he famously declares:

“Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink his blood, you have no life in you; 54 he who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day.

At every Mass Jesus says to us “I am he”, when he says through the priest: “This is my body, this is my blood given up for you”.

Conclusion:

The progression in this story is so informative, not only as we think of what it meant for this woman, but what it means for us. The Church is the Body of Christ today. As such Jesus is to be present to those, who like this woman discover they are valued for who they are. Such is a respect for their physical presence. Their questions are honoured and are thereby carefully and thoughtfully answered. Such is a respect for their intellectual presence. Their emotional and moral life are attentively understood... Such is a respect for their emotional presence. Their

soul's need for the life-giving water that only the Messiah can give is truly honoured. Such is a respect for their spiritual presence.

May St Peter's ever more be known as a community where the rivers of life-giving mercy are flowing generously. May we be a Jacob's Well where we encounter the Jesus who truly can read us so that we know we are forgiven, accepted and understood. For when this happens then Jesus the bridegroom can be fully present to his bride, the Church.

We are multi-faceted creatures who because we are made in God's image need to be understood the way Jesus understood this woman all those centuries ago at Jacob's well. Indeed be it an East African Village, a theologian's study, a Samaritan town or here in Calgary, when we allow Jesus to read us like a book we can exclaim:

Come, see a man who told me all that I ever did.