



## Revd Ro's Reflection on Third Sunday of Lent

### Year A

**Romans 5.1-11**

**John 4. 5-42**

I have just been reading a book with a choir school setting; it is just after World War II. The acting head boy is having trouble with two juniors who are trying his patience. Finally he gets really angry. He goes to church on Sunday morning because as he says to the headmaster, he wanted to because he got cross. The head, who is very wise, says something like this. 'You don't like getting cross, do you? It's a very wasteful way of emitting energy. The engine races and the wheels don't go round.' That's a pretty good summary. It usually doesn't achieve much except making us feel guilty about it and of course it can be very hurtful to other people. As the head says 'It's a pity we are led by our feelings so much but we are all human.' He is aware of the behaviour of the two lads and points out that the Jews are really no different from the Samaritans but sometimes the Jews won't have any dealings with them. What the head is pointing to is faction and the trouble it can cause. I thought about this when I was looking at today's gospel reading, Jesus' meeting with the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well.

It is worth pausing here to think about the Samaritans, we know about them from the parable of the Good Samaritan and this account. The bitter rivalry between the Jews and Samaritans goes right back to just after the exile when the Jews returned home. They found the section in the middle of the country, that is between Galilee in the north and Judea in the south was occupied by the Samaritans. The thing was that they claimed to be the true descendants of Abraham while Jews though related to the true religion are more of an offshoot. They also claimed that Mount Gerizim, near to the biblical town of Shechem, situated in the West Bank was the holiest place on earth, not the Temple Mount in Jerusalem. There was bitter rivalry between them and feelings ran deep because it was centred on something dear to their hearts, religion. Something I learned was that there are still a few remaining Samaritans who hold these beliefs.

In Jesus' time, as a Jewish rabbi he would have been expected to condemn and shun the Samaritans. Jesus does not do this. Because Samaria lies at the centre of the country dividing Galilee from Judea

anyone making the journey to the south, specifically to attend festivals at Jerusalem had to make a choice. They could either go through Samaria or down the valley of the Jordan then up from Jericho to Jerusalem. We know how dangerous that road was because of Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan. It was dangerous to go through Samaria too, Jews and Samaritans had nothing to do with one another, and they would certainly not eat or drink with them. Because the Samaritans had opposed the Jews return from exile there had always been anger and bitterness between them, sometimes it led to violence, so many Jews would not take the route which crossed Samaritan territory.

This background is important because it is very necessary to understand this gospel story.

4.1 'Now when Jesus learned that the Pharisees had heard, 'Jesus is making and baptising more disciples than John' — <sup>2</sup> although it was not Jesus himself but his disciples who baptised — <sup>3</sup> he left Judea and started back to Galilee. <sup>4</sup> But he had to go through Samaria. <sup>5</sup> So he came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. <sup>6</sup> Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon.'

Jesus is moving from south to north, back into Galilee. The reason is interesting, the Pharisees are rearing their heads again saying Jesus is baptising more than John and John is opposed by the powers that be. Interesting too is the easily missed comment that it was the disciples baptised, not Jesus. Anyway at this stage Jesus wants no trouble, he has a mission to fulfil so he chooses to go north over Samaritan territory. It is interesting to link this back to our reading last week, firstly because it was about Nicodemus who was a good Pharisee and decent man, but also because the thrust of both that passage and the one from Romans was that Jesus came into the world to save sinners, to save all humanity. Jesus does not hold with faction but knows how destructive it is. He goes into Samaritan territory and witnesses to them. Jesus, though he was a Jew and came to the Jews is not their private property, he calls all people.

So we see Jesus sitting by Jacob's well in the hot sun at noon, notice how John is as always specific about time and place. The story that follows is similar to that of Nicodemus because Jesus is talking of spiritual things in metaphors but both characters can only see at a literal level so totally misunderstand him.

<sup>7</sup> 'A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, 'Give me a drink'. <sup>8</sup> (His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.) <sup>9</sup> The Samaritan woman said to him, 'How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?' (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.)

We remember the time, about noon, when suddenly the Samaritan woman appears, she has come to draw water. We know, and certainly Jesus would, that the women would fetch the water in the cool of the morning and use it for the day to come. She does not and she is alone, why? Obviously because no one wants to associate with her. She is shunned, a pariah. Jesus understands why, like his meeting with Nathaniel he knows all about the woman before she appears.

The second thing to notice is that he speaks to her, Jewish men did not speak to women in public and they certainly wouldn't have spoken to a Samaritan, furthermore he asks her to get him a drink of water from the well. The woman is flabbergasted; Jews don't use the same vessels as Samaritans and he has nothing for her to draw water for him.

So far we understand the unusual nature of this meeting but now Jesus begins to speak to her much as he did to Nicodemus,

<sup>10</sup> 'Jesus answered her, 'If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, "Give me a drink", you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water.'

This is truly wonderful, here is Jesus basically saying, 'I am the Messiah and I bring the gift of God, the living water which can cleanse and save the world.' It is she who needs to drink of this living water from him, to be baptised and cleansed of sin and turn to Christ as the anointed one.

<sup>11</sup>The woman said to him, 'Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water?' <sup>12</sup> Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?'

Just like Nicodemus she tries to understand at a literal level but accidentally hits the nail on the head when she says, <sup>12</sup> 'Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob?' We are tempted to smile and say, 'Just a bit!' Jesus is Messiah and God incarnate and here he stands before this woman, this Samaritan woman who is even shunned by her own people, revealing the truth of God to her. It is a staggering event and truly a wonderful illustration of those words, 'Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners.'

<sup>13</sup> 'Jesus said to her, 'Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, <sup>14</sup> but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.' <sup>15</sup>The woman said to him, 'Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water.'

It is so ironic that she only understands at a literal level but Jesus is offering her the waters of life, God's holy word brought by his son. Yet she says, 'Give me this water' and that is exactly what Jesus does but first he challenges her. I have said before that we need to challenge wrong doing wherever we meet it and never be afraid to stand up for what we believe to be right. Jesus is going to make her see that he knows her for what she is and expose her wrongdoing. So he cuts to the point

<sup>16</sup> 'Jesus said to her, 'Go, call your husband, and come back.'

Of course he has put his finger on the sore spot and she, in a typically human way, tries to get out of admitting her behaviour.

<sup>17</sup> 'The woman answered him, 'I have no husband.'

It is of course true, but a calculated evasion as Jesus points out. The so-called truth can still mask the lie as she is simply hiding her immoral behaviour. Jesus sees through her evasion.

'Jesus said to her, 'You are right in saying, "I have no husband"; <sup>18</sup>for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!'

Jesus does not simply point the finger at her though, as with the woman caught in the act of adultery. There are five men involved too. Whether the woman had had four husbands and now was living with someone we will never know. Whether she had had a tough and abused life being swapped from man to man we just can't say but Jesus knows her inner soul and he is offering salvation. Sadly she is still evasive, she praises him because he knows things about her, just as Nathaniel did then goes back to the old Samaritan/ Jew argument,

<sup>19</sup> 'The woman said to him, 'Sir, I see that you are a prophet. <sup>20</sup>Our ancestors worshipped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem.'

Now Jesus addresses this argument head on,

<sup>21</sup> 'Jesus said to her, 'Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. <sup>22</sup> You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews.'

Jesus makes it clear that salvation is of the Jews but that has a double meaning; he is not just talking about Judaism and the Temple. Salvation is of the Jews because Jesus is a Jew and he brings

salvation for all who turn to him. Very soon mountains of worship and the Temple will be superseded by him, the Messiah. God's new way is brought in by Jesus.

<sup>23</sup> But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. <sup>24</sup> God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.' <sup>25</sup>The woman said to him, 'I know that Messiah is coming' (who is called Christ). 'When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us.'

Now we come to the crux of it and the woman has done quite well to get this far in understanding. She voices central belief, I know the Messiah is coming and he will reveal the truth of God. Now Jesus reveals the wonderful truth to her; it is a moment which leaves us awestruck.

<sup>26</sup> Jesus said to her, 'I am he, the one who is speaking to you.'

It is a wow moment but it is broken by the return of the disciples,

<sup>27</sup> 'Just then his disciples came. They were astonished that he was speaking with a woman, but no one said, 'What do you want?' or, 'Why are you speaking with her?'

No wonder they neither are shocked, Jews don't fraternise with Samaritans, nor do they hold conversations with a woman and she is totally beyond the pale, she's both! But none of them dare to challenge him. The fact is Jesus does this again and again; he comes to the poor, the sinners and the disadvantaged. Jesus turns convention on its head; he breaks down artificial barriers and he teaches his followers to live by new values, the kingdom values. Salvation is for all who turn to him, God's love is for all. Factions, sects, nor any other artificial barrier that divides people have any place with God who loves us all equally. They should have no place in Christianity either, that is Christ's teaching. It is what is in the heart that matters; it is what you do and how you try to follow him that is important. This is illustrated now by the woman. She rushes to her people and she witnesses to Jesus. She becomes the first missionary to the Samaritans. The result is they flock to Jesus a Jew, yet they listen to him.

<sup>28</sup> Then the woman left her water-jar and went back to the city. She said to the people, <sup>29</sup> 'Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?' <sup>30</sup>They left the city and were on their way to him.'

There follows Jesus' teaching the disciples. They are still shocked at Jesus' behaviour, more still when he refuses the food they have brought. Once more they simply are not on Jesus' wavelength but are viewing the whole thing at a literal level.

<sup>31</sup> Meanwhile the disciples were urging him, 'Rabbi, eat something.' <sup>32</sup> But he said to them, 'I have food to eat that you do not know about.' <sup>33</sup> So the disciples said to one another, 'Surely no one has brought him something to eat?' <sup>34</sup>Jesus said to them, 'My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work. <sup>35</sup> Do you not say, "Four months more, then comes the harvest"? But I tell you, look around you, and see how the fields are ripe for harvesting. <sup>36</sup>The reaper is already receiving wages and is gathering fruit for eternal life, so that sower and reaper may rejoice together. <sup>37</sup>For here the saying holds true, "One sows and another reaps." <sup>38</sup>I sent you to reap that for which you did not labour. Others have laboured, and you have entered into their labour.'

Jesus points out that his food is to do the will of God, rather like his answer to the devil in the wilderness. Jesus' mission is to bring the truth of God to all people. Now the time is ripe and he is harvesting souls, fishing for people, those people who turn to him and follow him and take his truth into the world. The disciples are the reapers and the harvest is near. They haven't had to do the spade work, Jesus the Messiah is doing that and before him the prophets. Their time will come and the church of Jesus Christ will depend upon them and all Christians who carry his message to others.



The woman in her small corner has done just that by taking the word of Jesus to her people and they come to him.

<sup>39</sup> 'Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman's testimony, 'He told me everything I have ever done.' <sup>40</sup> So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them; and he stayed there for two days. <sup>41</sup> And many more believed because of his word.'

This story is so far reaching, so much more than the Good Samaritan. These people come to Jesus seeking the Messiah; he stays with them for two days and teaches them. The result is wonderful because they say to her,

<sup>42</sup> 'It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Saviour of the world.'

'This is truly the Saviour of the world,' the world note, not just the Jews. This should be placed with Jesus' words from last week,

<sup>16</sup> 'For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.' (John 3)

<sup>17</sup> 'Indeed, God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.'

His time with the Samaritans, his testimony to them and his saving of the Samaritan woman are really central to the message of Christianity. Jesus lived and died for all people, all who turn to him are inheritors of Salvation and eternal life.

St Paul is obeying Jesus' command to 'baptise all nations in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.' Paul is the apostle to the Gentiles taking the saving message of Jesus to all.

This then takes us to our reading from Romans. It is a carefully crafted and argued letter, so we have to follow his argument which is difficult when our reading is an isolated passage. We need to link it back.

<sup>5.1</sup> 'Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, <sup>2</sup> through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand;'

Paul makes the point clearly his 'therefore' refers back to, 'It will be reckoned to us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead, <sup>25</sup> who was handed over to death for our trespasses and was raised for our justification.' (Romans 4)

The relationship of harmony with God had been broken by human sin. It is Jesus, 'the second Adam,' who by his death and passion restores humanity to a right relationship with God once more. So 'therefore' we are at peace with God because of the actions of Jesus the Christ. Jesus won the promise of eternal life with God and forgiveness of sins to all who truly turn to him through the grace of God, freely given in love.

It is a wonderful promise. God loves us more than we can know and any break in the relationship was healed by Jesus' self-giving love. So we 'have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; So now, in this peace we become part of that loving relationship which is, reflected in the community of love within the Godhead. God's love and peace is for everyone who turns to him in love. There is no other love deeper than the love of God and we can respond by calling him 'Abba,' Father as Jesus did.

We cannot hope to understand the nature of God and where people often fall down is to picture him in their image, to bottle the God they want to imagine. This is ridiculous but is sadly the trap so many people fall into. The God who is the creator of all that is and who is as close as our own

breathing, knows us intimately and loves us deeply. This is our faith, and faith is about trust. We have seen the face of God in the incarnate God, Jesus who walked with humans and reflected the nature of God. As Paul says

‘and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God.’

We can have a deep and loving relationship with God. This we know. For us there may be problems, we are sinful, we do fail him but God in Jesus ‘opened wide his arms for us on the cross’ and longs to establish a loving relationship with his people. It is humanity that turns its back, not God.

Life is not easy; the world is in a sad state; we have only to look at what is happening today. It was similar in Paul’s world. He and those early Christians were living under Roman governance and the Pax Romana was achieved by force and persecution.

‘suffering produces endurance,<sup>4</sup> and endurance produces character, and character produces hope,<sup>5</sup> and hope does not disappoint us,’

But, says Paul, although times are tough, although we may not feel his presence, we must remember God is there and his Holy Spirit is with us. Life is real and life is earnest and suffering may come but God will strengthen us to face whatever comes. Paul promises that Jesus will save all who turn to him and live in his way even though it may mean suffering or death. That is the ‘hope’ they must focus on.

We may not suffer persecution for our faith but a good many people do. Paul and the apostles and those followers of Jesus certainly did. Yes you may be persecuted but it is what you do about it that matters. Suffering is never good. That is not what Paul means when he says,

<sup>3</sup> ‘And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance,’

Think of his words, ‘I boast in the cross of Christ my God.’ suffering must be expected, persecution must be expected. Jesus has warned of it when he says, ‘the world will hate you.’ This is what Jesus means when he refers to the ‘world’ in this context. St. John does the same when he writes,

<sup>10</sup> ‘He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. <sup>11</sup>He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him.’ (John 1)

If you do not go the way people want you to they will turn against you and the results can be painful. That goes for any kind of situation where a person stands up for what is right against the powers that be. This then is to be expected, says Paul. We are speaking for Jesus Christ, Son of God who is the way to the Father. Now then, if people refuse to accept this we are likely to suffer for it BUT, and it is a huge but, though suffering of itself is never good it brings results.

I wonder how many times, looking back on an experience which, though it may have been tough at the time, we come to realise later that it has, in fact, made us a stronger character, a stronger person.

Hope is so important, think of 1 Corinthians ‘And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.’

The hope of the Christian is in Jesus Christ and the salvation he has won for us. Followers of Jesus down the ages may have seemed foolish in the world’s eyes, but we are in a sense in the world and not of it. We know that God is with us in all our lives and when we turn to him in prayer he is there.

The hope of the Christian is not disappointed

<sup>5</sup> ‘because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.’

The Holy Spirit is poured out on all believers from the early followers in the upper room at Pentecost to us today and onwards down the ages to come. At our baptism the same Holy Spirit descends to us as it did on Jesus at his baptism.

The promise goes further too. The scriptures are fulfilled in Jesus; the new and final covenant is through Jesus.

<sup>6</sup> 'For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. <sup>7</sup> Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die. <sup>8</sup> But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.

Jesus came to the world to save all humanity. The world was in sin yet he died to save the world. People do not earn salvation; it is freely given by the God who loves all. All we can turn to God and live in Christ's way. Well says Paul if Jesus died for all as sinners how much more will those who have turned to him and renounced sin be with him.

<sup>9</sup> Much more surely then, now that we have been justified by his blood, will we be saved through him from the wrath of God. <sup>10</sup> For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life. <sup>11</sup> But more than that, we even boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.'

The promises of God are given to us and part of this is that the new creation of God has begun in Jesus and it is up to us to help to bring it to fruition and pray in trust for the day when he will come again in glory.

These readings both show the depth of God's love and that we are welcomed into that love and that we can truly be at peace with the God of all the world and with one another.

*I heard the voice of Jesus say, 'Behold I freely give the living water thirsty one stoop down and drink and live.'* Horatius Bonar

~~~~~