

John ch 4. Questions Questions.

Read John Chapter 4

The liturgical scholars who plan the readings we use in church offer us two long conversations from the Gospel of John as part of our Lent reflections.

John 3 – Nicodemus (last week) and John 4 – the woman at the well (this week). We are encouraged to deliberate on these conversations, both noticing what is different and what is similar. Also – what is the outcome and why did John put them in his Gospel? After all he tells us himself there were hundreds of others things that happened.

Contrasts.

Nicodemus. Male, Jewish, a Pharisee, a member of the ruling council, a teacher and we are given his name.

The woman; female (obviously), Samaritan, uneducated with a chequered past and present (!) and she is never named.

There could not be a greater contrast between two people encountering Jesus. I think this is one of the reasons the Apostle John tells us these two stories. From the highest in the land to the obscure foreigner, Jesus is the way, the truth and the life. Nicodemus would see himself as automatically included in God's kingdom – he was a Jew! The woman would regard herself as an outcast on many levels.

Truth is, they are both in the same boat and Jane reminded us last week that no status, or career or wealth or reputation is sufficient and no failing, no mistake, no sin is too great. All that matters is that you believe in the Son whom God sent out his great love for the world. All need forgiveness and it's available to all.

In both conversations, Jesus deliberately speaks in an obscure and provoking way. He creates an environment where the ground suddenly shifts under their feet so that they don't quite know what's going on. He asks questions not previously thought of.

With Nicodemus Jesus deliberately throws new ideas his way with the intention he will brood over what Jesus is proposing.

- You cannot see the kingdom unless you are born-again.
- As Moses lifted up the serpent, the Son of man must be lifted up. (what's that about?)
- "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. (Everyone??? Anyone???)
- Light is in the world, the people love darkness
- Those who do what is true come to the light.

This method of Jesus; to say provoking things and ask bizarre questions is for one purpose only. To invite the hearer to open their minds and explore the questions so that they can break out of whatever limits their understanding so that they can encounter the living God and discover truth.

Did it work?

Yes it did, Nicodemus becomes a follower of Jesus, he is one of the two men taking Jesus body down from the cross.

Jesus is heading through Samaria and is tired. It's midday and he's hot and thirsty. He sits at Jacob's well – an important point, because Samaritans and Jews shared the same early history, both are descended from Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

He asks the woman for a drink.

John ch 4. Questions Questions.

This one request has already shifted the ground under the woman's feet. Jews and Samaritans hated each other, would never share things in common and it was the biggest breach of protocol for a Rabbi to speak to a woman this way in public.

(Note for those reading. I went on to say that I had researched why Jews and Samaritans hated each other and it was an involved and lengthy story and we'll explore it another time. Thing is though, there's a special kind of hatred when you actually share the same roots!)

So we are already well down the rabbit hole heading for wonderland and all he's done is to ask for a drink.

She replies in a normal way ("How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?") Jesus shifts the ground again talking of living water. The woman is still being rational and talking about water and the well and no bucket... she says "where will you get this living water?"

Then...she plays Jesus at his own game and throws in a provoking comment of her own "Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob who gave us this well...?"

Jesus counters her with the obvious and the obscure. If you drink this water from this well you will get thirsty again. But the water I give will become a spring gushing up and lead to eternal life.

The woman ignores the eternal life bit...but she quite likes the idea of living water and never having to come to the well again.

It's a bizarre confusing conversation. We understand both sides. We can see she's talking about real water. We know that Jesus is using living water as a metaphor for his salvation and the gift of

eternal life. I think it's also referring to the gift of the Holy Spirit. We need water to live – we need living water to live eternally.

But it's hardly surprising she doesn't get it.

Then the ground shifts AGAIN under her feet as Jesus says "Go and call your husband". What is she to make of that? Will this bizarre man give them living water as a couple???

She is obliged to answer ..."I don't have a husband "and Jesus reveals he knows her story. 5 husbands and living with a man currently.

That is far too personal...far too close to home. Who needs that on a hot day?

So SHE shifts the conversation on to a safer topic (compared to her personal life) although controversial in its own way.

Recognising Jesus as a prophet she turns to one (of many) controversy's between Jews and Samaritans. Where they worship....and the conversation goes on until she says "I know that the Messiah is coming" and Jesus tells her that she is right and the person she is talking to is the one. She is the only person he speaks directly too in this way.

Jesus is ALWAYS looking to set people free. We can speculate and imagine all manner of scenarios for this woman's life, but Jesus looks with love to see someone who needs to be set free.

The story goes on as we heard earlier with the woman running back to share her discovery with the whole town.

John ch 4. Questions Questions.

Two other things to say...I think (just my opinion) Jesus spoke further with the woman about her life and God's grace and that's what was going on when the disciples returned.

Also – in the following conversation between Jesus and the disciples he does the same thing again but this time it's food not water. They are talking about lunch, Jesus is talking about being sustained by doing his fathers will.

So what does this mean to us?

I've already said Jesus is for all.

Through His Spirit Jesus is still available to those who are seeking (like Nicodemus) and Jesus is seeking those who are lost, bruised, battered by life and thirsty.

The Holy Spirit is at work today challenging, questioning, provoking and unsettling. It's not to catch us out or trick us into something, but to open our minds and hearts to grasp how high, how long, how wide and deep is the love of God.

Jesus ALWAYS gets personal. He's not interested in a pure academic appreciation of theological truths...but in healing broken hearts and making wounded souls whole.

I love the story of the woman at the well. I like her courage, I like her response to Jesus. Her whole life is laid bare and yet she is transformed with joy and excitement into an evangelist. It gives me courage.

As I journey through Lent, can I allow myself to hear the questions? Will I let Jesus point to my story in order to transform me? Will I allow the uncertainty of questions and discovery lead me to a new place of understanding and experience of the love of God.

If the woman at the well can – so can I.

(Note – although written on the Thursday before, the ground had already shifted under my feet as I came to preach on Sunday. I referred to the uncertainty and strangeness of the days we are living in and the fears and anxieties we have. Even these can serve a purpose...they can bring us closer to a loving Heavenly Father who is our rock and refuge.)