

SUNDAY OF THE SAMARITAN WOMAN St John 4: 5-42

In the texts appointed by the Church for us to read on a daily basis we are currently studying the Acts of the Apostles, the second book of St Luke, and the Gospel of St John. We started the Acts of the Apostles before the Matins of Pascha on Easter night and John's Gospel in the Liturgy of Pascha with the reading of the Prologue 'In the beginning was the word'. In both texts we are brought into the world of the mission of the Church of Christ on earth but in slightly different ways. In the gospels we are told that when he sent out his disciples to preach the news of the Kingdom during his presence on earth and before his crucifixion, the Lord counselled his disciples as follows: "Go nowhere among the Gentiles but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." Yet we soon find Jesus himself coming into contact with those considered 'unclean' by the house of Israel: a Canaanite woman who refuses to leave him alone until he has healed her daughter and a centurion in the Roman army who has such faith in Christ that he tells him to heal his servant from afar as he is not worthy to have him under his roof. Before his Ascension the Lord utters the instruction to "Go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit", a text which is read in its turn at matins and at the end of the baptism service. The Church in its infancy in Jerusalem, as recounted in the Book of Acts, witnesses startling miracles at the hands of the disciples; it exhibits such zeal for preaching the resurrection of Christ, as displayed for example by the first martyr Stephen, that three thousand are converted and baptised in one day and it experiences the opening up of the Way, as the new religion is first called, to the Gentiles. This happens most spectacularly in the gift of the Holy Spirit descending on Cornelius, the Roman centurion, and those in his house both Jews and Gentiles in the presence of Peter, the head of the Church.

In St John's Gospel, as you have just heard, some thirty-eight verses are devoted to Christ's encounter with a Samaritan woman at the patriarch Jacob's well in the city of Sychar and clearly the author considered this meeting very significant for a number of reasons. Perhaps most important is the fact that "Jews have no dealings with Gentiles" as St John points out in the text. They are ritually unclean and have been since the break-up of Israel into two kingdoms under King Rehoboam centuries before. In the parable of the Good Samaritan, the priest and the Levite are ritually correct in walking past on the other side of the road past the half dead man but it is the despised Samaritan who breaks the traditions to perform an act of compassion on one who is in dire need. It is significant that Christ appoints a member of an unclean race as the 'star of the show' in the story. According to the Law Christ and the woman Photini should not be talking to each other. To make matters worse a man would not according to the customs of those times be holding a private conversation in such public places with a woman who is a stranger. We are told, "The disciples were astonished that he was speaking with a woman." And then there is a third aspect to the incident namely that this particular woman has a long and murky history with men. Five husbands and the current partner is not her husband. No doubt in this environment at this time her reputation would be known in the city and many would ostracise her socially, especially married women who would not wish to be identified with her behaviour with the opposite sex or those with strong moral views.

But Christ is not discouraged by personal history or social convention. He goes to the heart of the matter by asking for a drink of water as he has no bucket and he moves on from the physical water in this famous well given by Jacob to his son Joseph to speak about a different kind of water. This water is one that she would ask him for if she knew who he was and what kind of water it were. This is living water, which satisfies thirst forever and does not need replenishing. She asks the Lord for this living water but he changes the subject and moves on to the kind of life she is living by suggesting that she call her husband. This opens up the question of her personal life by revealing intimate knowledge about her. And already she is forced to the

conclusion that he has some special clairvoyant gift from God to know about people's lives. She calls him "a prophet". This is a significant title indeed since in the Samaritan creed there are no prophets except Moses so already she has identified him with the great Lawgiver. But this statement then seems to divert her into the age-old argument between Samaritans and Jews about the true place of worship. Is it Mount Gerizim where the Samaritans established their place of worship or is it Jerusalem where Solomon built the first temple?

The Lord studiously avoids being involved in a theological argument about the differences between the two kingdoms though he does say salvation is from the Jews. Instead he talks about the true nature of worship of the Father from now on as not being localised but as being in spirit and in truth. This is what the Father wants as God is spirit. The woman understands this new age as being brought in by the coming of the Messiah or Moses, according to her tradition, but Christ reveals directly to her that he is the Messiah.

The woman goes and tells her fellow citizens about her meeting with Christ with the famous phrase, "He told me everything I have ever done". And we learn at the end of the account that the Lord stayed in the city for two days and many believed in him, some because of the woman's testimony and others because they met him and believed that he was truly the Saviour of the world.

The account is most interesting because it reveals how gradually a woman, a schismatic Jew, comes to faith. Last week we heard how a paralytic of thirty-eight years does not need to be taken down into the pool of Bethesda to be cured by an angel but is healed by Christ directly. This week we are told that we can approach God directly not through any medium but in spirit and in truth. The woman is amazed that the Lord knows everything about her but he does not judge her, as he refuses to do also in the case of the woman discovered in adultery who should be stoned according to the Mosaic Law. Rather he emphasises the treasures of the Kingdom of Heaven, the pearl of great price, the treasure hidden in a field which men are prepared to sell everything for. The woman reacts with enthusiasm to this offer by Christ. "Give me this living water so that I too may never thirst again." Christ sees into her heart and knows that she is ready, just as he calls up to Zacchaeus, who is similarly ready in the sycamore tree and invites himself to dinner. After Zacchaeus's promise to restore what he has defrauded the Lord proclaims, "Today salvation has come to this house for the son of Man came to seek out and save the lost." This is echoed very clearly in the life of the Samaritan woman in the incident at the well.

For us it is a reminder of how close God is to us and to the ordinary events of our lives but above all to what is going on in the depths of our hearts. "He is not far from us," writes St Paul and Christ himself reminds us that his concern for us is so great that even the "Hairs on our heads are numbered". What we do and say and think is known by God and his presence within us gives us the joy of experiencing his profound love for us. The Samaritan woman is detected in adultery but the joy of discovering the living water of Christ far outweighs any sadness or shame by bringing to her the realisation that God knows all about her and cares. It is the same for us though we err and stray continuously. May we too as we journey through Pascha to Pentecost, continue to experience that joy of Christ's resurrection and be comforted by the knowledge of his eternal presence in our hearts, the living water that will cause us never to thirst.

Christ is risen!

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