

Equality or Equity

"Imagine that you are babysitting two children, and they are hungry. You go to the fruit bowl, and you start to pick up two apples to give them to each child. However, you remember at the last moment that one of the children is allergic to apples. Instead, you reach for one apple and one banana, and that way you're being fair." "You still give one piece of fruit to each child, but you're also being equitable because you're giving each child a legitimate way of satisfying their hunger. If you had gone for two apples, the child who's allergic to the apple would on the surface have a way to satisfy their hunger, but they couldn't do that without getting ill. In this way you're being fair," "You're giving each child a piece of fruit but, you're also giving them something that is in line with their individual needs so they can be successful."

This year's Woman's International Day which was on the 8th March had the theme *Embrace Equity* and they highlight that there is a difference between equality and equity. Equality is giving everyone the same but equity is treating everyone with fairness and making sure that it is a level playing field for us all.

Equality is giving everyone a shoe but equity is giving everyone a shoe that fits.

In our Gospel reading today, we see Jesus showing equity in his meeting with the woman at the well in Samaria.

She was a woman who had many challenges in her life; a woman who faced huge obstacles and Jesus recognised this.

There are so many reasons why Jesus should have avoided this woman, at all costs, according to Jewish law, and certainly not show her equity or fairness.

1. The simple fact that she was a woman. Women at the time were of the lower class. They had few privileges. Their sole function was to serve their more dominant partner the man. So like all women of her time and subsequent generations afterwards and even today...she faced the challenge of simply being a women.

2. She was a Samaritan. They were considered to be of the lowest order. They were neither Jew nor Arab. They were not a true Israelite; they were seen as parasites and so she has this hanging over her.
3. She was a sinner. Jesus knew all about her lifestyle and in those days she was “untouchable” in the sense that she polluted people with her sin. No self respecting person would come near her.
4. She was alone and in a vulnerable situation, in the midday sun, she had nobody to speak to; nobody to help her. She was very vulnerable – an easy target for the wrong sort of man. Jesus was risking his reputation by speaking to her alone.
5. She had a bad reputation – she was married five times and she is living with another man. The odds of her receiving equity and fairness from others was very low. She was on a hiding to nowhere.

But Jesus saw that this woman needed God's grace in her life. He saw that she needed equity...fairness in her life. She needed a helping hand. She needed someone to lift her up from her low position and give her an opportunity to start again.

Let us see how Jesus does this.

1. We are told that he had to go this way – He had to go through Samaria. Why? Because Jesus knew that there was a woman in great need. A woman who was being treated with contempt by her peers; a woman who was ostracised and lonely and carrying a huge burden. So, he had to go through Samaria and he knew that she would be at Jacob's Well, alone, because no one in their right mind would come to the well in the baking heat of the midday sunshine, but she came because it was the only time that she was not looked down upon and spoken about. Jesus had to go this way, and this tells us something very important about God. Jesus is the image of the invisible God and in Jesus we see the heart of God and God has a heart for the oppressed and the downtrodden and his eye is upon them and he is with them.
2. He knew all about her already – How did he know her. Yes, Jesus was human but he was also divine and he could see into people's hearts and minds. Had he travelled that way before – possibly – had he seen

her before – maybe – but what we do know is that he knew her history, and he was interested in her, and giving her the chance to start life over again. How lovely it is to have a God who knows us intimately, the psalmist caught this well in Psalm 139, that God knew us before we were born, he sees us in the womb, and that God is with us throughout this life and into the next. God knows us – he knows everything about us. Just as Jesus knew everything about this lady. He felt her pain. I think there is a relationship between equity and empathy. As Christians we need the two to work together. Can I say well done to all who supported Fresh Start yesterday, it was more than a coffee morning - a genuine expression of people coming together because they care for women who have been trashed in life. Jesus is with them!

3. He knew that he had something to give her – What? – Well they enter a conversation about water. Jesus comes to the well, as she does, and he asks her for water. She asks Jesus why are you asking me? Who am I to you? Jesus then speaks of living water; he speaks of something far deeper than she was able to give him. The water that Jesus was speaking of was the Spirit of God, which he says would be like a stream within her, welling up to Eternal Life. He had something to give and that was God's life-giving, transforming spirit. He saw her need; he saw her dejected spirit, and he is about to lift her up into the light of God's presence.

4. He knew where true worship was to be found – Where? – It wasn't on a mountain top or a holy place, a synagogue or a temple, a chapel or a church. True worship, said Jesus, was to be found deep within the soul. It was not about a formal religion, but a spiritual awakening, something that would transcend culture and religion; a deep satisfying filling of the soul. That part within us which makes us truly who we are. This week I had a funeral service for Liz McNeilly, Liz was brought up in Northern Ireland, from an early age, she was brought up in the Christian faith. I was delighted to hear from her son Alan that his mum was reading her daily devotionals and her Bible right up to end of her life. She had daily devotions from Terry Waite,

that amazing man who was incarcerated by terrorists in Lebanon whilst working for the church.

He recalled that in his dark cell, there was a chink of light used to come through the shutter in the window. He wrote "Gradually that light illuminated that room and I used to say to myself, "Don't give up, remember light is stronger than darkness" and somehow I was able to maintain hope in that situation." He added that he never questioned his faith.

I came across these words on the day of Liz's funeral and I used them at the end of the eulogy. Terry Waite wrote, "I used to say in the face of my captors, you have the power to break my body, the power to bend my mind but my soul is not yours to possess."

"What I meant by that was 'you're never going to take me completely because my soul lies in the hands of God' - and that very simple belief was enough to enable me to maintain hope."

Our souls lie in the hands of God – we are spiritual people and we need to be filled with God's spirit. Liz did this through her Bible and devotions and, I would assume, prayers.

5. He knew that her life would touch others – Who? – The testimony of this woman was to be enormous – she was to go back home and tell them all to come out and see the man who told her everything. She was blown away by the grace, mercy and love of Jesus.

Jesus brought a new beginning to this woman, Jesus gave her a fresh start, and what he did for her, he can do for us. Perhaps we are feeling a bit like this lady – we need a helping hand – we need God to lift us up – we need equity – we need fairness – we feel wrongly oppressed.

God is the same yesterday, today and forever and whoever we are or whatever we've done, God is there to meet us.

Where is our lonely place? Where do we go to get away from everything? Jesus is there, he is waiting for you to open your hearts to him and to allow him to come in.

Another man like Terry Waite who was incarcerated for his faith was the German pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer and he was jailed by the Nazis for challenging Hitler and his regime and he was executed, just before the war finished, by his own people, but he wrote many wonderful words during his captivity and today we are going to sing one of his hymns:

*We turn to God when we are sorely pressed;
we pray for help, and ask for peace and bread;
we seek release from illness, guilt, and death:
all people do, in faith or unbelief.*

*We turn to God when he sorely pressed,
and find him poor, scorned, without roof and bread,
bowed under weight of weakness, sin, and death:
faith stands by God in his dark hour of grief.*

*God turns to us when we are sorely pressed,
and feeds our souls and bodies with his bread;
for one and all Christ gives himself in death:
through his forgiveness sin will find relief.*