

Crossing the Boundariess

What's it like to be different?

To be black in a white world?

To be white in a black world?

What's it like to be confused about your gender?

Or to have leprosy and be cast into a leper's colony?

What's it like to be different?

To be a Noah and build an Ark in a country that has never seen rainfall?

To be a Daniel and not bow the knee to a false god?

What's it like to be different?

To be a dreamer like Joseph with his coat of many colours?

To be like Jesus and speak of a different kingdom coming from another world?

To be like Jesus, and have your own family turn away from you because they don't understand you or your message?

What's it like to be like the woman in our gospel story today?

A lonely woman who had lived a very challenging life; a woman who we would assume was crushed and broken inside. A woman who had had five marriages, five marriages that didn't work! We know little of her narrative, but there is enough in this short extract of her life, to suggest that what we have before us, is a woman who was in deep distress, likely not of her own making.

Her husbands may well have died, they may have divorced her, she may have been unfaithful. We don't know, but what we do know is that she came to a lonely well, in the middle of nowhere, outside of her town, to draw water, in the hottest part of the day. We can assume that she wanted to be anonymous, to hide, to find refuge in her own company.

In 2003, the legendary hip-hop group Black Eyed Peas released their iconic song "Where is the Love?" The socially conscious track was a response to the 9/11 terror attacks that took the lives of 2,977 people in 2001.

This song could have been written for our Samaritan woman.

Where is the love?

But if you only have love for your own race

Then you only leave space to discriminate

And to discriminate only generates hate

And when you hate, then you're bound to get irate, yeah

Madness is what you demonstrate

And that's exactly how anger works and operates

Man, you gotta have love just to set it straight

Take control of your mind and meditate

Let your soul gravitate to the love, y'all, y'all

People killin', people dyin'

Children hurt, hear them cryin'

Can you practice what you preach

Or would you turn the other cheek?

Father, Father, Father, help us

Send some guidance from above

'Cause people got me, got me questionin'

Where is the love, the love, the love?

The Samaritan woman could easily have sung those lyrics – where is the love? She was a migrant even in her own town. We can assume that she had very few friends – if any?

Every possibility that she has been shunned by her fellow women in her town – five husbands after all – perhaps they thought, is my husband next in line!

Scorned, looked down upon – in need of a friend. Just like the Elephant Man.

If we have any compassion at all, then our hearts go out to this lonely destitute figure.

10 years ago, a young black woman from Guinea Bissau turned up at a service in my previous church. She had three young children, a boy of about 10, a girl about 5 and a suckling baby. She had no English, no money, no way to communicate; her clothes had holes, she had nowhere to turn to, but she was drawn to the church.

The church was her well of salvation, she found refuge and strength there, and found her feet and through the love and care of kind Christians; through time, she was able to put her life together; learned English, got a job, was a loving mum, and the last I heard from her, that her boy, was at university and her life had purpose and a direction.

Where is the love?

She found love in the Church?

But it's not always the case!

The Church can be first to judge and to build barriers?

The Church can be a difficult place for people who are different.

Then there is another issue with the Samaritan, she is a woman!

No decent Jewish man, let alone a Rabbi, would speak to a woman alone or be seen in her company or even exchange a greeting with her, and yet Jesus spoke to her.

I'm sure that we were all shocked by the murder of the three innocent children in Southport and further shocked by the wave of uncivilised

behaviour, from people who reacted to a false situation because in their mind, the perpetrator was an immigrant.

Where is the love?

It's a big topic, immigration, and people settling here in the UK from other shores. People who have escaped the nightmares of persecution and war.

How we treat people from different ethnic groups can tell us a lot about ourselves, our own prejudices, our own fears, and our understanding of life.

Where is the love?

In our reading today, Jesus meets with this woman from a different ethnic group – I suppose you could say that her ethnic group was related to the Jews. The Samaritans were at one time part of the Jewish faith.

But there is history.

The Samaritans intermarried with other ethnic groups. They sold their birthright and to the orthodox Jew this was heresy.

In 720 BC, the Assyrians attacked the northern kingdom and took hostage the Jews but left some Jews behind and then they sent their own people in to populate the cities of Samaria. In time there were inter-marriages and so those who were once orthodox Jews, mixed in with the foreign people and their gods. To the orthodox Jews, in the southern kingdom, this was an unforgivable crime. That's some of the backdrop to this title given to the woman in our story today, she was a woman of Samaria – a Samaritan woman – no name, just a title.

No Jew would speak to a Samaritan but Jesus did!

He saw the person and not the label.

He didn't look at the cover of the book – he went to the content.

Two weeks ago, we reflected on Jesus words, "for God so loved the world he gave his only Son that whoever believes would not perish but have eternal life".

In our reading today, we see these words being fleshed out.

Jesus had to go through Samaria!

This is an important verse because it tells us a lot about Jesus.

Here was Jesus, the Son of God, breaking through the barriers of nationality and orthodox Jewish custom. Here is the beginning of the universality of the gospel; here is God so loving the world, not in theory but in action.

Jesus had to go through Samaria. There were other ways to pass through Samaria, those roads might take a bit longer and the orthodox Jew was prepared to do this. But not Jesus!

Jesus had to go through Samaria.

Samaria was no problem to him. Jesus loved the Samaritans as well as his own people the Jews. He came to break down barriers and to build bridges. Samaritans and women were in his eyes all loved by his Loving Father. He came to call all people to himself.

He had to go through Samaria, for this one lonely destitute lady was in deep distress. She didn't know it, but this was her appointed time to meet with God.

This story tells us that Jesus still goes through Samaria.

Perhaps today, you feel a bit like this woman, lonely, on the outside, and here is the good news for you. Jesus is coming your way. He sees you and he will meet with you in the depth of your loneliness. When you are in that lonely place, open up to him, share your heart with him, for he is there, sitting at your side, listening to your story; he already knows it but he wants you to tell him. He won't judge you because he sees into your heart, he knows your pain and the challenges that you face.

God comes to this woman through Jesus; he comes to her as a tired man, thirsty and wanting a drink of water. It's amazing how God appears to people; he doesn't always come with a band of angels, or through a church, more likely than not, it's through the vulnerabilities and humanness of individuals.

Jesus was exhausted from the journey, his disciples had left him at the side of the well, they had gone into the town to stock up in food supplies and Jesus was left on his own.

John's gospel often displays Jesus as the miracle worker, stilling storms and raising people from the dead; but John is also fully aware that Jesus is the Son of Man not just the Son of God, and here he portrays him as a lonely figure, who also like us, struggles with his every day physical needs. One who thirsted and hungered, one who felt pain and emotions, just like we do. We have a God who fully understands our humanness because we have a God who has walked where we have walked and who has experienced the deepest of human pain and loss.

Willie Barclay writes, "Few stories in the gospel record show us so much about the character of Jesus" than this one! It shows us Jesus' humanity. It shows us his compassion.

She should have fled the well when Jesus spoke to her, but there was something about Jesus that attracted her to him. The warmth of his personality, his compassionate heart, his understanding of her life story. He did not judge her.

She had at last met someone who was willing to listen to her; listen to her brokenness, listen to her loneliness, listen to her pain and her fears. We only have a snippet of the conversation, I'm sure much more was said, and that she poured out her heart to this compassionate stranger.

We come to an interesting part of the story when Jesus said to her, "Give me something to drink?"

This was his opening words to her. He asks her for something from her!

It must have been tempting for Jesus, the Son of God, to jump in and fix her life immediately. He saw she was a troubled woman. He saw that she was in need of being fixed. But he wisely draws her into conversation, into relationship.

By asking her for a drink, it would have relaxed her, and put her in a position of power, she had the means to draw the water, she had the means to quench his thirst, she had the means to revive Jesus and Jesus made her feel important. Give me a drink please!

This allowed for an interchange and a conversation around life giving water, but that's for next week.

This week, we see Jesus reaching out, and going beyond the boundaries and breaking down the barriers and the question for us this morning is, what

boundaries and barriers in our lives needs to be expanded or broken down?
Who in our lives needs us to reach out to them and be there for them?

As a church, do we make it easy for those who are different than us to feel at home here?

Racism will not be eradicated overnight but as Christians we turn to Jesus and we learn from him; we see that he loved people, not because of their nationality or religion but because they were created in the image of God. He saw their humanity first and foremost and he calls us also to walk in his footsteps and to imitate his actions.

In the words of the Black Eyed Peas.

Father, Father, Father, help us

Send some guidance from above

'Cause people got me, got me questionin'

Where is the love, the love, the love?

The love is found at Jacob's well – a well that connected both Samaritans and Jews.

Jacob the one who built the well, and who had been a struggler and deceiver found God's love when he struggled with God and overcame.

In a lonely overnight wrestling match with a stranger, Jacob met with the love of God, which would change the course of his life and make him into the Father of Israel.

It's at this ancient well, Jacob's well, that this Samaritan wrestled with herself and through it the grace of God.

This is Jesus' first outreach to those beyond Israel. It is very significant because it shows us God's loving intent to those beyond the boundaries of race and religion – it shows us that he cares for everyone, despite their colour or race, and the bible tells us that he has a heart for the orphans and widows in our world.

The riots in our UK cities this past week is indeed shameful, and how wrong they are on so many levels.

Let us pray and work for peace and resolution for all who find themselves caught in the midst of war and famine and racial and gender discrimination, and may the body of Christ – his Church – meet people at their lonely wells, as they come searching for living water.

Amen.