

The Woman at the Well
Bp Stephen Verney's Funeral
19 Nov 2009
John 4:3b-26;39-42

I am speaking today under strict instructions from Stephen.
Definitely, no eulogy; I am to speak on St. John's Gospel.
It is of course impossible to leave Stephen's life out of the equation, because his very life was a stained glass window through which St. John's Gospel's light flowed in abundance.
It is hard to separate the Gospel itself from someone who lived the Gospel he preached so beautifully and full of freshness and life.

I shall keep pretty much to the brief, but I will relate the Gospel to some of the incidents in Stephen's life, as it would be next to impossible not to do so.

I shall focus on the story of the Woman at the Well, which Stephen has written so beautifully about In Water into Wine.
Loving and helping others is always a risk.
Jesus risked his life, as did Stephen in the war years in Crete, where he lived among the dangers.
Resistance to the occupiers, sharing their dangers.

Paradoxically, sharing dangers against a common enemy and being on territory, which is not your own
Also builds a bond of loving and fellowship with those with whom you share the dangers.

Loving and reaching out to people—takes risks
(The Gospel has always been about risks)—but it also takes great attention to reconnaissance.

Reconnaissance is essential to the task of risks.
It is apparent that Jesus knows quite a bit about this woman, whom he has only just met at the well.

Is Jesus a mind reader, or has there been some research going on?
He seems remarkably up to date about this woman whom he has only just met.

Perhaps there is something interesting going on here.

In the Gospel of Luke, Chapter 10-
It says that Jesus "appointed seventy-two others and sent them out ahead of him, in pairs, to all the towns and places he himself was to visit."

Might this possibly be reconnaissance, rather than preaching?

Let's assume so, and hypothesise what the intelligence report might look like:

"Okay, Jesus, you are going through a Samaritan town called Sychar, where there is a very deep well, which Jacob gave to his son Joseph. There is a woman who hangs out there-

Let me describe her . . .

She's attractive, though a bit long in the tooth at this point, she not only helps get water, but she also offers travellers a bed for the night for a fee of course.

As a result she has married 5 times, and the man she is now living with is not her husband.

Her role in the village is central. Being where she is she knows all the news, and if anyone needs to know anything, she is the one they would ask. She is the centre of the town's whole social network. She is the central source of information for the entire village. She is also very interested, obviously, in strangers, and in passing on information.

Spending time with her might equal spending a lot of time with others.

Jesus arrives at mid—day in the heat of the sun.

He starts a conversation with her, and she registers surprise, that a Jew, particularly a famous religious one would have social intercourse with an outsider.

Surely, this is breaking boundaries. This might be considered religiously dangerous. What would righteous people or the establishment think?

They talk about water, which is why he is there. . . .

But something more than the water in the well-water, which might be available, which would not leave you feeling thirst for more, since it is so satisfying.

He then asks her to call her husband.

She replies that she has no husband, and Jesus then springs information, which it would seemingly be impossible for him to know . . . she has been married to five husbands and is now living with one to whom she is not married.

She is surprised, shocked and totally mystified.

She asks if Jesus is the Messiah; Jesus says he is.

She races through the village shouting"

"Come see a man who has told me EVERYTHING I ever did; I wonder if he is the Christ?"

The villagers have this astounding news from their most reliable source of information-

And because of the surprise, she would probably reveal to each member of the village, in turn, every detail of their conversation.

In spending time with her Jesus, has in fact, spoken to everyone in the village through her.

What might be going on here?

Jonathan Miller, who is a playwright and also a Neurologist, spoke to a group of psychotherapists about how acting and neurology go together. A neurologist has an eye for detail, one small indication of something greater going on. This influenced him as an actor.

For instance in playing a drunk, he didn't fall about, the way you might think. .. He just got 2 details right: he balanced on one finger, and talked to the person's necktie.

Many actors did this.

People would report that he got EVERYTHING right. ..

Not really, he got two things just right . . .and people said the two things stood for EVERYTHING.

The encounter with the woman at the well was not only a healing of her, but an act of healing of Jesus by directing her and through her the village to a deeper unity, which transcended differences.

In this way,

Stephen's particular interest in the Gospel of John

As being central to deeper healing of differences is just right.

Jesus prayer for unity that the Church in the beautiful pastoral prayer in John 17 that he wanted the Church to be one, even as Jesus and his Father are one.

What might reconcile the differences within the Church today, but the Gospel of John?

In the Gospel there is the very ingredients of possible healing.

As we know. the Eucharist is a completion of the Jewish Passover.

Even though drinking blood, is against the kosher rules of the Church.

That is totally reversed and transcended to a spiritual dimension when we drink Christ's blood in the Eucharist, as we will today.

It is the unacceptable being transformed into a beautiful sacrament.

What might heal the divisions in the Church today is contained in Jesus' last act on the cross, recorded in John 19:26.27.

The story of Jonathan and David is competed in Jesus last act.

You remember that Jonathan was Crown Prince of Israel under Saul.

Because of his love for David, which exceeded that of women. Jonathan and David entered into a covenant that David would become a chosen member of the Royal House of Israel, and would replace Jonathan as next king of Israel on the throne.

This would be as shocking as Prince Charles saying he loved a man more than anyone Else, and would give up his succession to the throne in favour of that love through a covenant with God.

On the Cross -. Jesus completes the debt of honour, which the House of David owed to the House of Jonathan.

The Son of David, Jesus, now makes John/Jonathan a member of the Royal House of David by saying to John and his Mother...

"Mother, here is your Son: Son here is your Mother" and Mary went to live with John from that very hour.

Why is this significant?

Making someone you love a chosen member of your family and next of kin is in today's parlance a Civil Partnership.

If Jesus does that in no less a place than his last act on the cross.

Then it could legitimately be a sacrament, different than marriage instituted by Christ at the most central moment in the Gospel.

Already monks and nuns marry Christ in a group of others of the same gender. Complete with wedding rings and right of inheritance, and a bishop usually conducts this ceremony.

I say this in that the Gospel of John. Stephen's favourite Gospel may contain a resolution which is already in place and able to heal to what is splitting apart the body of Christ.

Anyway, don't shoot the messenger . . .it's in the Gospel for all to read and could potentially heal the division by taking what may be unacceptable to onto a deeper level as Jesus reconciled the woman at the well by taking the observations about the physical aspects of water to a deeper level.

Anyway. I have an axiom, which perhaps Jesus himself might have had.

Loving is risky business, and we are never sure if we have it right.

HOWEVER, as a rule of thumb, if any action makes the Pharisees angry, then I MUST be doing something right!

It's impossible to do the risky thing of loving
Without offending at least some of the establishment.
That's how you know you've been loving;
Criticism can be seen as an affirmation, rather than a block.

As an example of positive criticism, Stephen once pulled me up on my misconception in saying that someone was at the CLIMAX of their career, when they were at the top of their profession.

"Wrong." he said. "climax" is the Greek for ladder, and in scripture in Jacob's dream. He says he saw a ladder up to heaven with Angels ascending and descending. Similarly with St Stephen before he was martyred, seeing the same thing.

"When you go to repair a roof." Stephen said, are you planning on living up there, or is it your intent to make a safe return journey?"

Sandra also spoke of when Stephen went up a ladder to pick grapes, and she anxiously held it steady on the ground, as he precariously filled the bucket at the top and handed it down.

She looked as she was holding the ladder and it was actually named 'climax'.

Anxious moments.

Climax in our life is when we each came down safely from the top—

Whether it be a ladder, or a great career...

Can we come down the ladder from fame, employment, physical fitness and arrived safely at the ground again

As a full—fledged human being

Without hankering for the good old days to be at the top again`?

That is the real test.

Like the angels in Jacob's ladder, Stephen met the challenges of old age with realism and humour and a profound reality.

As he received the last sacrament, anointing and laying on of hands.

He was alert. and very much in charge of his beautiful going as a completion of coming down from his ladder.

He directed the detail of what was to happen in an alert and prayerful way. ..

That attention to detail was with him right to the end.

Stephen Verney's genius was not only that

He got his details just right.

But that he was prepared to take risks.

The specific meaning of the Greek words, in which the scriptures were written. ..

The pastoral attention to detail. ..

Just the right word...the right inflection and gesture

The infectious as playful laugh

When you left after a conversation, you knew you had just had a drink of living water

. . . sparkling or still

Like the woman at the well . . .you felt

"He seemed to get EVERYTHING" right . . .because he got the detail right.

And it felt as if it would probably be just the way Jesus might have done it himself...

It looked spontaneous and it was.

But deep prayer, an inner stillness, informed it.

He had an awareness of the sacrament of the present moment.

In that he was a great model to many of us.

As we say goodbye and thank you to Stephen. ..

Let us do it in a moment of silence together.

I would suggest that each of us
Reflect on an incident or two in silence. ..
Of times when Stephen deeply touched us
With his living Gospel...
Where he met us at our own individual wells.

In re-collecting that moment
We can say thank you
And goodbye in the silence
- - Each in our individual way.

(Silence)

Thank you Stephen...
For giving us of yourself...
Go forth now with our love
To the Lord you love.

Canon Beaumont Stevenson
Blewbury. Oxford

19 November 2009