

There was a post doing the rounds on Social Media a few weeks ago. A warning to those of us who exercise ministry and may have occasion to be selecting readings for a wedding - a warning that we should check the references of the readings rather than assuming that we know them by memory.

Often read at a wedding is the verse from the First Letter of John, referenced as 1 John 4:18 "*There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love*". However when planing for a wedding some poor pastor in the states had missed the 1 before John - meaning he read from the Gospel of John rather than the Epistle, and standing before the bride and groom and their friends and family proclaimed the line from John 4:18 that we have just heard "*The fact is, you have had five husbands, and the man you now have is not your husband...*" -

perhaps not the most reassuring thing for the groom to hear on his wedding day! :-)

Perhaps a rather provocative line to read at a wedding! But today's passage is a rather provocative one - one that challenges us to think about our attitudes to others.

Jesus, in the reading today, is making the journey from Judea to Galilee. The reason that he is making this journey, we are told a couple of lines before our Gospel reading begins, is because the Pharisees had heard that he was baptising more disciples than John.

As we know the Pharisees were a group who liked to live by the rules. Not only did they live by the rules, but acceptance of and following the rules - rules about purity and religious observance, they believed, were essential to the coming of God's Kingdom.

The fact that Jesus broke those rules meant that he was a threat to the security of those such as the

Pharisees. In John's Gospel he has already cleared the temple courts, changed water into wine and been declared as the messiah.

Now Jesus could have chosen to stop breaking the rules - to lay low for a while in the hope he would stop being noticed by the Pharisees. But he chooses to continue to break the rules - he continues to cause scandal - continues to provoke - he continues to violate the man-made rules and regulations that were designed to diminish those who were considered outsiders.

Jews were not supposed to talk to Samaritans. Men were not permitted to address unrelated women in public. And a rabbi like Jesus had no business talking to shady ladies such as this one. At least that's usually the way in which we think about this passage.

However, I wonder if the way we usually think of the passage - focusing on the assumed 'sinful state' of our Samaritan woman due to her sixth relationship and string of husbands, has somewhat been coloured by

our own rules - the rules of the Church - around sex and marriage as they have evolved over the past 2,000 or so years.

Marriage and family were understood very differently in Jesus time. If the woman was five times divorced - it is culturally far more likely her husbands had chosen to divorce her - women were generally powerless to initiate divorce. In a brutal and dangerous world it was common for women to be widowed more than once. And it was also not uncommon for people to live together without being married - there were legal restrictions on who could marry who. So projecting our modern understanding of marriage and the family onto a woman from Samaria who lived 2,000 years ago is probably not the most helpful thing for us to do!

Furthermore, I believe, that if this woman had been such a social outcast, as traditional readings of this passage will have us think, I am not sure that the many Samaritans who believed because of her testimony would have given her the light of day.

I'm not sure the focus of this story should really be the marital state of the Samaritan woman, but more that it's a story about Jesus seeking out an unlikely person

- a female Samaritan - in an unlikely place. It is the story of the universalism of the Good News, contrasted with the rules, regulations and specifics of the Pharisees.

It really made no sense for Jesus to go through Samaria. Any observant Jew made sure that they did not go through Samaria - indeed if the Pharisees were journeying from Judea to Galilee they would take the longer road through Peraea to avoid coming into contact with the unclean Samaritans. For 7-800 years Jews and Samaritans did not go near each other, other than to fight each other. Samaritans were considered unclean and to share and be alongside Samaritans would make a Jew unclean.

But Jesus goes there. He gets alongside someone whom would be considered an enemy. And in one simple, earthy question spoken to a woman, he blows away 700 years of enmity, fighting and suspicion. 'Can you get me a drink of water?'

Jesus and the Samaritan woman parley - they play with this idea about living water. The water the woman had come to draw from the well would not satisfy her - it was dead water. It's symbolic. We all hang on to dead

water in some ways. It's all those little things that stop us from recognising and living to our full potential as children of God. We live in a culture where we are taught to crave money, to crave success, to crave beauty, and we organise our lives into little boxes. Even spiritual practices are affected by this – meditation advertised to make you more effective at work. But we yearn for something more, we crave that living water, the life of the Holy Spirit living within us.

As human beings, I believe, that our deepest longing is for someone to love us simply for who we are. I think we all have that longing. Every single one of us. To be known. To be loved. Simply for who we are, despite who we are. Jesus breaks through the hundreds of years of hostility between the Jews and the Samaritans, the all of the purity rules which bound and diminished people and, quite simply he treats this woman with dignity. He accepts her and loves her. He reaches out across a 700 year old divide and treats her like a human being. He gives her that living water. And as she receives this dignity, this living water, it melts her. Her questions and her attitude to Jesus change – her suspicion and hostility towards this Jewish man speaking to her go away, and she ends up leaving her

water jar and hurrying back to her town carrying with her the living water – this good news – that she has been given to her neighbours. That living water has gushed out over racial, religious and gender boundaries. Over those man made rules and neat little boxes people had invented to keep themselves in and others out. And this woman becomes one of the first evangelists.

The lessons from this encounter carry through to the church - to us - today. It is through Jesus giving dignity to this outcast woman that she is transformed - transformed from someone who wonders why this man is speaking to her - from hostility and suspicion. She is transformed into someone with the confidence to leave her water-jar behind and rush off to proclaim the Gospel. She becomes someone who other are compelled to follow.

As we continue to journey through Lent, the passage offers us some challenges for our lives and our discipleship. It challenges us to think about from where we draw our water? Do we hold on to dead water - all of those little things that stop us recognising and living our lives to their full potential as God's children.

And it challenges us to think about how we respond to others. When we meet hostility and suspicion do we respond in kind - further entrenching that hostility and suspicion, or do we seek to transform it by responding with love and kindness - recognising that, regardless of any human differences the person before us is worthy of love, and of dignity.

Amen