

## SERMON: The Woman at the Well (John4:4-29)

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Sunday 22nd March – St Barbara's Earlsdon

For once, to say we live in extraordinary times, is not an exaggeration. Our movements are curtailed to a minimum, our groups and activities have all ceased, our working lives are radically different, the shops are short of food, businesses wonder how they will survive, the health service is gearing up for unprecedented demand. These are challenging times. And for us as a church, this is the first Sunday in decades when St Barbara's church building has not hosted a service on a Sunday morning. Our lives are in flux.

And yet, in the midst of all this upheaval and change is God, who the Psalmist describes as our rock in times of trouble, our fortress, our protector, our strength. He does not change. His faithfulness, his compassion, his love, remain, even as we face the challenges we currently face today.

Our gospel reading, written and telling an event 2000 years ago, still remains as relevant today as then, speaking to us on this Mothering Sunday and to us in this time of unprecedented change.

For our Bible reading speaks of of a woman coming to a well at the hottest time of the day, midday. Drawing water up from a well is hard work, but in the heat of the day even more so. And then having drawn it, she is faced with the arduous task of carrying it back home, with no-one to help her. For she is quite alone. No-one to notice or appreciate what she has done, or how hard she has to work to provide something as basic as water for her family.

That maybe the experience of many mothers listening or reading this today. That sense of doing the arduous, often routine, jobs, that only ever get noticed if they are not done. It may also be the experience of those of you who have queued for hours in supermarkets this week or have gone the extra mile for colleagues this week, but in the light of all that is going on, received no acknowledgement or thanks.

But as with the woman at the well, so it is with us. There *is* someone there, there is someone who notices. It is Jesus. And his presence transforms this woman's hard chore into the most special moment of this woman's life. His presence changes everything.

It reminds me of the story of Brother Lawrence, a medieval monk, who was regarded as being one of the least educated monks in his monastery and so ended up doing all the cleaning and washing up jobs, while other monks went off to study and pray. But in time, he developed a reputation for remarkable godliness. For as he did those seemingly mundane tasks he would discipline himself to seeking out God's presence in the belief that God was as much with him in the dishes as he was in the chapel, as much with him in the cleaning as he was in the singing of the psalms. And if God was present with him everywhere, then everything he did could be worship. He described it as "practising the presence of God".

In these extraordinary times there is much that we are unable to do, including physically meeting together to worship God. But God still remains present with each one of us. Like with Brother Lawrence, let us "practice the presence of God", let us view the things we can do, no matter how mundane, as opportunities to encounter God and worship him.

What also strikes me about the woman at the well is that in many respects she is socially isolated. Why would she come to draw water from a well when no-one else is around to help, unless out of desperate need or out of need to avoid others? For

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whatever reason, this woman seems cut off from her community.

There has been much talk in recent weeks about “social distancing”. But the Bishop of Coventry made an excellent point this week: the last thing we should be doing at this time is *social* distancing. We should be doing *physical* distancing, but actually we need to be increasing our social closeness. We need to be doing all we can to be strengthening our social closeness at this time.

For Jesus, at the well, the barriers to social closeness were cultural and religious. She was a woman and a Samaritan, and Jewish men like Jesus were not supposed to have conversations with them. But Jesus has time for her. In fact we eavesdrop into one of the longest conversations in the whole of the gospels.

Our barriers at the moment may be less cultural and religious, but simply physical. We are, to the most part, confined to our homes, and discouraged from social gatherings. But those barriers can and must be overcome. For however long this situation continues, whether days, weeks or months, we need to do everything we can to build those social connections by phone, by letter, by email, by social media. Let us keep in regular, daily contact with one another. Sign up to be part of the church phone chain that I hope to get going this week, but don't just wait for that. Ring up people you know. Let us enjoy each other's company, and support one another at this time. This woman, for whatever reason, had become socially isolated and lacking in help. Let that not happen to any one of our congregation. Let us work at being socially closer than we have ever been before.

The third thing that strikes me about the conversation between Jesus and the woman is that as the conversation goes on it turns out that Jesus knows this woman better even than she knows herself. He sees the pain of her life. To have had five husbands would have meant five bereavements, whether through death or divorce. How hard must that have been?

Mothering Sunday, in any year, can be a difficult day, a reminder of the pain as well as the joys we may experience, the loss of mothers who have died, the acknowledgment of mothers we have come distanced from, the sadness of not being mothers ourselves, or the pain of losing those who we were mothers/ carers to. But this year Mothering Sunday may be particularly poignant, cut off from our mothers or children or those we love. A day often when families get together being a day when this year families are required to keep apart.

In the midst of all this, Jesus understands. Just as he understood the woman at the well, so he understands each one of us, he understands our feelings and our fears, our anxieties and our feelings of loss and bereavement. And just as with the woman at the well, he does not turn a blind eye, but he gives us time, he is there for us, and he offers us hope. So let us be open with him today, and draw strength from him.

So today, let us practise the presence of God even in the most mundane of tasks; let us reach out and connect with one another that no one may feel alone; and let us be open before God with our fears and needs, for he already knows us better than we know ourselves.

*Rev Tulo Raistrick*