“A Wider Sympathy” – Dr. E. S. Kempson, St Mellitus Colege

Grosvenor Chapel – 15 March 2020

Opening prayer:

‘So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth. The one who plants and the one who waters have a common purpose, … For we are God’s servants, working together’. Amen.

Today I want to talk about how moving from a narrow sympathy that focuses on people’s problems to a wider sympathy that sees their value and joy changes our life of faith.

Feeling someone else’s’ pain, sympathising with their struggles, being moved to give from your own possessions and power to someone who needs what you have-- for many people, charity begins here, but it isn’t, or at least shouldn’t be, the end. This is why in the passage we read today, Sam Wells says

‘Charity requires a step of faith: but that faith is not that you have a problem to which I must be able to find a solution; it’s that you have a pearl inside you and by steadiness, durability, solidarity, trustworthiness, encouragement and companionship, I must be able to help you bring that pearl into the glowing sunshine to be behold in all its glory.’

Our Gospel story today is an excellent example of finding that pearl in another person. Despite what you may have heard, Jesus’ encounter with the Samaritan Woman at the well is not a story of sin, repentance, and forgiveness. In contrast, his meeting with the woman caught in adultery is: he saves her from stoning and tells her to go and sin no more. There is no mention, however, in today’s gospel of the Samaritan woman sinning or needing to repent and be forgiven, even though it is said she’d had many husbands.

It is entirely possible to have had five husbands without breaking cultural norms, because at Jesus’ time divorce and remarriage were generally accepted and widowhood was common. As one biblical scholar puts it: ‘She very well could have been widowed or have been abandoned or divorced. Five times would be heart-breaking, but not impossible.’ The book of Tobit in the Roman Catholic Bible even tells the story of one woman who was widowed seven times, and ostracised because people feared it meant she was cursed. The Samaritan woman may have been an outcast, but there is little suggestion in the biblical text that she had done anything to deserve it. It is only that we are so used, with our narrow sympathy, to look for her sin and not for the pearl inside her.

Jesus, as one would expect, does not make that mistake. He begins by crossing boundaries of gender, ethnicity, and religion to speak with her. The woman exclaims with surprise: ‘How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?’. Jesus seeks to reach the people in Samaria. From his desire to include them, we learn, as another preacher has put it, that ‘community can only be built when we are not afraid of overcoming old prejudices and are willing to break social conventions that dehumanise us’. By the end of the passage, many other Samaritans have come to believe because of what the Samaritan woman told them. She is not so much like the prodigal son welcomed home—but rather—she is like the rejected stone that helps form the foundation of a new Christian community. When Jesus tells her everything about her life, he is not condemning her. He is showing that he knows who she is and nothing about her is hidden. He loves her exactly as she is, with all her imperfections. He wishes to speak to her and give her the living water that never fails.

You see, this story is about more than overcoming prejudices and taboos. In it we too can find living water, just as the Samaritan woman did, once we read it with a wider sympathy.

That Jesus and the Samaritan woman meet at a well is important, because such springs are known throughout the Bible as places of God’s provision and images of God’s abundant love. YHWH twice saves Hagar’s live with a well, and Moses draws water from a rock, under God’s instructions, to save the Israelites in the wilderness. Jesus offers the Samaritan woman living water; once she drinks it, she will no longer thirst. What this means, however, is not immediately obvious, either to the woman or to most readers today.

Fortunately, the book of the prophet Isaiah provides a much needed clue about the living water. If you listen, you will hear that God comes in our time of need, that if we act with love and care for the afflicted, following God’s guidance, this is when living water flows. Isaiah 58:9-11 says:

Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer;  
    you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am.

If you remove the yoke from among you,  
    the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil,  
if you offer your food to the hungry  
    and satisfy the needs of the afflicted,  
then your light shall rise in the darkness  
    and your gloom be like the noonday.  
The Lord will guide you continually,  
    and satisfy your needs in parched places,  
    and make your bones strong;  
and you shall be like a watered garden,  
    like a spring of water,  
    whose waters never fail.

This is the water, to live this way is intimately bound up in God’s love and guidance.

Once Jesus offers her this living water and shows that he knows her perfectly, she begins to realise whom she is speaking to. ‘I see you are a prophet’ she says, ‘I see’ being a Johannine expression of trust and faith. At her questioning, Jesus tells her of a time when the divisions between Jews and Samaritans will be overcome, united by their worship in Spirit and Truth of the Father. In a moment, she reaches the climax, her epiphany, that Jesus, the Jewish stranger at the well who shouldn’t even be talking to her, this man is the Messiah.

Now, when the disciples return, they are still stuck in a narrow sympathy, unable to see why a holy teacher like Jesus would speak with a Samaritan woman. Nevertheless, their incredulity and judgment can’t keep her down, she is overflowing with living water—she cannot keep it to herself, she rushes like a waterfall back to her city to tell everyone who will listen about the stranger, the messiah, who has seen her completely, known her, and lovingly given her the water of life. The woman whom the other disciples would not even speak to, she became a disciple taught by Jesus. And then, she became an apostle sent to spread the good news, so others will be made well, be made whole, and be made wise. Many in her city came to know and believe in Jesus of Nazareth, and to follow his way of life.

At the end of the story, we can see one final lesson for the male Jewish disciples. They saw themselves as those closest to Christ, but they were not the only ones doing God’s work. As Jesus tells them ‘One sows and another reaps. I sent you to reap that for which you did not labour. Others have laboured, and you have entered into their labour.’ Others have laboured, others like the Samaritan woman whom they had discounted as the wrong gender, ethnicity or religious persuasion. We should continue in our work as we live the way of Christ, but we should expect that those whom we don’t expect have already been at work before we even arrive.

If there are two images I’d hope you remember from my time with you today, it is this: the spring of living water and the harvest that others have sown. If we think of these images when we act with charity, we will take on a wider sympathy.

First, in the Spirit of Christ we find living water, which will overflow in our lives. Tell people where you have found a well of living water like Isaiah described; Call on God, and he comes. Instead of speaking evil and pointing fingers, care for the afflicted and those in need. Then we will be strong to the bone, our needs will not go unsatisfied, and we flourish like the fresh streams coursing through at luscious garden.

Live this way, and you will flow with life; tell others about the springs in your life. When you share your community, your prayer, your church, your friendships, and your work for social justice, it is not so that you become a middle man bartering it to others; You tell and share so that others may make it their own.

And second, look for the harvest that is already out in the world, ripening before you or I even heard of it. This means looking for the pearl in others, seeing what the Spirit of Christ has already wrought in their lives, even if they have no conscious sense of the divine. Afterall, the Apostle Paul may have had the story of the Samaritan woman in mind when he told the Corinthians to stop arguing over which Christian teacher to follow. He said: ‘So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth. The one who plants and the one who waters have a common purpose, … For we are God’s servants, working together’ (1 Cor 3:4-9). God is the source, the spring of life and steadfast love.

May we speak to others and listen to others in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.