

27th February 2005. Lent Three

Rob Lamerton

Readings:

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Exodus 17: 1-7

Psalm 95

Romans 5: 1-11

John 4: 5-42

So often we wonder about the situation in the Middle East and the intransigence — the hardness of attitudes on both sides by a small percentage — years of conflict has hardened hearts. St Paul once spoke of hearts so calloused by the trauma of life they were incapable of being softened.—

I'm sure we have come across people like that. Hardness of heart in the divisions of the Anglican Church—

The woman at the well in the gospel story represents many years of hardness of heart between Samaritans and the people of Israel -- the Jews.

Oddly enough, Jacob's well may well recall an ancient unity BEFORE the division and animosity — Jacob had dreamt of a ladder stretching between heaven and earth — that heaven and earth were linked — the same image is applied to Jesus in the first chapter of John.

Is it a sign that in this person in whom heaven and earth meet there will be restoration of that ancient unity? Possibly

Samaria was originally the name of the capital of the Northern Kingdom when the original Kingdom of David was divided as far back as 925 BC — later the name was applied to the whole area.

It was captured by Assyrian invaders in the year 721 and the then Israelite population was taken captive to be replaced by foreign settlers who brought their old and pagan religions.

In some ways the religion of the old united kingdom remained BUT when Ezra and Nehemiah led the Jews back from captivity in Babylon, they found it impossible to unite the inhabitants of Samaria and the restored Jews. Controversy and suspicion did not lessen with the years and by the first century BC, the time leading up to Jesus, hostility marked this relationship. So often we hear of Jews in the gospels commenting on the Samaritans and recognizing faith in them.

In John's gospel which we read today the word Samaritan is used only one other time and that is by the Jews who accuse Jesus of BEING a Samaritan and therefore having a demon! The attitudes were pretty hardened — and from the Samaritan side as well! "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?"

As if it wasn't bad enough to speak to a Samaritan — she was a woman as well.

Last week in chapter three, Jesus dealt with the hardness, stubbornness, closed mindedness of a teacher of the Jews.

In between. the narrative points to a very deliberate shift in Jesus' ministry — aware of pressure from the Pharisees he is forced to leave and travels through Samaria where he meets the woman.

There is also evidence that the woman has had a troubled life — she was at the well in the middle of the day when most women would draw water and return home! [would have already drawn water...] — There are various interpretations of the five husbands but we may be led to believe she's in a pretty bad situation — and surprise surprise a wandering Jew asks for a drink — Her heart toughens

HE asks HER to care for him

and opens the way for him to care for her.

But in their conversation a different kind of water flows — acceptance, friendship, emotion, care, truth and whereas she gives water to drink to Jesus — He gives the water of Life to her.

Where do we get this living water?

In the story when the woman asks it is then Jesus confronts her with the truth of her relationship(s).

But at each turn her understanding grows

'you are a prophet'.

Then they talk about where is the rightful place to worship — The Samaritans worshiped on Mt Gerizim where they had a temple. Jews went to Jerusalem.

But there will come a time where places and temples will not matter — because access to God will be in Spirit and in Truth.

She is aware of the Messiah's coming — and openness — she does not quite take that step and still has questions — but things have changed!

The Israelites in the wilderness were angry and hardened their hearts! The woman too had a heart hardened against Jews as well as a broken heart.

Paul in his letter to the Romans says through all the difficulty "God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us."

from "Together in Song" Hymn 744 Geoff Bullock

Refresh my heart Lord,
renew my love;
pour your spirit into my soul

refresh my heart.

You set me apart Lord,
to make me new;
by your Spirit lift me up Lord;
refresh my heart.

and I will worship you, Lord,

with all my heart;

and I will follow you, Lord,
refresh my heart;

How does God refresh our hearts:

a chance meeting with someone who seems to know our heart and soul.
prayer, friendship, loving action, talking...