

Sunday 12 March 2023

The Third Sunday of Lent

The woman at the well (John 4:5–42)



Sermon © Revd Dr Paul Monk.

Bible readings © the publishers of the NRSV translation.

To see service transcripts from previous weeks, please visit the page,
<http://www.medlockhead.co.uk/resources/index.htm>

The woman at the well

I knew the instant I'd spoken that I'd upset her. I was about five years of age, and my mother had asked me what I wanted to be when I grew up. I said, 'An villain.' I thought I knew what the word meant—but soon realised that I didn't. The problem is that so often we think we know what a word means when in fact we clearly don't. It can catch us out in tax returns, restaurant menus, adverts, contractual small print.

And it also catches us out when we read the scriptures. A choice example occurs in today's epistle, where a key word is 'reconciliation.' Through Jesus we have received reconciliation with God. Like 'orphan,' the word is frequently misunderstood. People think it means a change from antagonism toward God. Like being an orphan, people think it implies nothing about the time after the reconciliation event. In fact, reconciliation means far, far more than that.

To understand the meaning of 'reconciliation' this morning, we're invited to read John 4:5–42. And to understand *that* passage requires us to be familiar with the Old Testament, and with the way betrothal is presented there. 'Betrothal' is more than an engagement, because it's a formal, legal cementing together of two groups, families, houses, dynasties. There are three passages in particular: the betrothal of Isaac and Rebekah in [Genesis 24](#); of Jacob and Rachel in [Genesis 29:1–14](#); and of Moses and Zipporah in [Exodus 2](#).

In each of these three betrothal stories, a series of events occur that fit into a heavily stylised template: in each case, a hero or servant cum broker goes to a distant country; he stops at a well where a maiden is working; she shows what an eminent bride she will be; a drink is given; the servant helps the woman by looking after her animals; she then hurries home to tell her family that she has met a person to marry; the servant is persuaded to go to the family home, where a meal is laid and a betrothal announced; in each case, she does subsequently marry the hero.

Each of these seven elements occur in exactly this order in the three Old Testament stories I mentioned. Indeed, the template was as familiar to the ancient Jews as is the story of Cinderella to us today.

In a subtle way, these elements also occur in John chapter four. Jesus enters the foreign land of Samaria—so here it's *Jesus* who is the hero or servant cum marriage broker; but next, unlike the strikingly attractive virgins in the Old Testament, the Samaritan woman is married already, married many, many times; next, true to form, Jesus has a gift: it's 'living water'; next, the woman returns to her village *to tell them of the man she has met*; the man stays with her family, and the villagers press Jesus to stay, *and he does stay with them*.

Notice also the way that just before the story starts there is a wedding at Cana

in Galilee in John chapter two, and then (in John 3:29) John the Baptist says that Jesus is the bridegroom, which makes John the Baptist the best man—a suitable role for an older cousin. So beyond reasonable doubt, this passage says the reconciliation Jesus achieved can be compared to his brokering a betrothal.

But if Jesus brokers a betrothal, what's the marriage; who's it between? Forget Samaria and Palestine, the violent Kosovo and Serbia of their day. Simple: while the scriptures are littered with choice metaphors to describe our relationship with God, the image of God as bridegroom and his people as bride is by far the most beautiful. Think of Revelation 21. So St John's story sees Jesus' reconciliation in terms of his brokering the betrothal between God and sinful humankind.

So now we see what the Romans passage was banging on about: the *reconciliation* Jesus won for us means that sinful humanity can at long last enter into intimacy with God, an intimacy so close we can legitimately compare it to a betrothal.

But, hang on a moment: if Christians are reconciled with God in this way, what is it implying if we compare it to betrothal?

Firstly, betrothal is a binding promise, a contract. In the Gospel story, Jesus hadn't merely come to save a Samaritan woman. He'd come, as God's broker—the Messiah—to reclaim his wayward bride and remind her of the binding nature of the promise he made with his chosen people. And as Christians reconciled to God, we have also entered a binding contract with God: at baptism, we *too* were promised to him. We are his. At the cross, he paid our asking price.

Secondly, betrothal is the time of preparation; it's never a time of passive waiting for a future wedding. It's a time of activity, of setting the house in order, of putting garments in the bottom drawer; it's a time to agonise over the wedding contract itself, and its talk of the dowry and consequences. As Christians reconciled to God, we are similarly to prepare our hearts and lives for union with God, ready for that phase of our lives which starts after we die. Jesus calls it, 'laying up treasure in heaven.'

And **thirdly**, betrothal is the time to explore the boundaries of love, and a time to *demonstrate* our love: just as betrothed people show their mutual love in a thousand ways, so we are to show our love for God. Similarly, we who are reconciled to God are not just to *say* to God, 'I love you,' but to *show* him our love with tangible gifts of time and money, seeking to make it utterly clear that we want him to be the centre of our everything. Being reconciled with God means that we can and should make God the centre, the very core, of our lives.

I knew I'd upset my mother when I told her I wanted to be an villain. I thought I understood the word, but clearly I didn't. In retrospect, when I became a Christian,

I also misunderstood the word *Christian*. And I misunderstood the words ‘sin’ and ‘prayer’—I thought prayer meant asking God to improve people’s health.

And I misunderstood the word *reconciliation*. Through John chapter 4, we now see that reconciliation means bringing about a spiritual betrothal with God. Through reconciliation, we can enter into the life God promises all the baptised, to be his for ever; through the reconciliation that Jesus achieved we are given the chance of eternity with God, so we prepare for it in this life; and through reconciliation, we realise that being a Christian is more being nice to each other (as I once thought the word to mean) but is a continual exploration of God and the way he loves us and we love him.

Sermon © Revd Dr Paul Monk.

Prayers of intercession © [Katherine Smith](#) (adapted)

Liturgy © 2000 The Archbishops’ Council.

Bible readings © the publishers of the NRSV translation.