Woman at the Well - Dialogue Sermon - based on John 4

Liturgy at St Peter’s church Winchester, March 5th 2016

Reflection point 1 - Mary Grey:

She comes, like many poor women in desert areas, from her village at Sychar, to search for water. Finding water in many poor countries is the responsibility of women. I have seen many women like her in the Thar Desert of Rajasthan. Early in the morning they come, and again, early in the evening. Sometimes together, seeking solace in each other’s company, and sometimes alone, like the Biblical Samaritan woman. Women in poor countries bear the burden of severe poverty more than their menfolk. Not only do they share the work in the fields, and responsibility for feeding cattle and goats, but they have the additional work in the household, and care for children – often numerous. Yet still they are seen as second-class citizens, often excluded from education and official positions. In public meetings they have no voice. Even further- Samaritans don’t speak to Jews – because they, the Samaritans- rejected the revelation on Mt Sinai:- their worship is based on Mt Gerizim where they still celebrate the Passover to this day.

That’s why this Samaritan woman comes in the full heat of the day – she needs to be invisible. Because of the shame she feels as to who she is …. The irregular nature of her relationships- 5 husbands and the “one she is living with is not her husband”. It’s not automatic that sin was involved in all these relationships: due to warfare, famine, disease, and injury, men in those days died frequently. A widow became either a beggar, a prostitute, or another man's wife. Each time, we presume, this Samaritan woman had chosen what for her was the best option. Yet- Jesus’ question touched the irregularity of her current relationship.

But isn’t this the very irregularity that this celebration, this Jubilee of mercy, is directed towards?

Reflection point 2 - Canon Paul Townsend:
Jesus is traveling from Judea to Galilee. Anyone who has visited the Holy Lands will know that there are two routes he could have taken. One was long and safe and goes along the Jordan Valley. The other is shorter but was more challenging because it could be dangerous. Jesus took the shorter one and not for a geographical reason or because he was in a hurry. Things in John's, Gospel are often not how they first appear and will reveal a deeper meaning. Consistent with the rest of his ministry in Palestine, Jesus is making a deliberate choice to go to those who had been rejected by the official religion of Jerusalem. Mary has explained why the Samaritans were hated and for our purposes they come to represent the 'poor people of God', who were often so ready to accept Jesus and his message. The Samaritans were "off limits" and not "people like us" which is why he went to them.

That no person is excluded from the love of God, regardless of what they might have done wrong, their sinfulness, their race, religion, sexual orientation or style of life, reveals to us, as does this Gospel, the very nature of God. It reveals what God is like, described by St. John as love itself, Jesus stands for the "heart of God" pumping out and unending stream of divine love which brings constant healing and forgiveness.

Jesus asks the woman for water to drink. It was not water he wanted. His request expresses God's own thirst and desire for the faith and loyalty of that woman, who stands for us all. God desired that she trust him. He wanted her to have that living water gushing up to eternal life. This is the power of the divine life, the Holy Spirit, welling up from the heart of God. "Mercy within mercy within mercy" as Thomas Merton would describe it and "grace upon grace" as St. John puts it in the first chapter of his Gospel. It is the stream of blood and water we see issuing from the side of Christ as he slept on the Cross. It is that gift from God which brings the unlimited and repeated experience which means that our sin, our brokenness and our need become the way to life.

**Reflection point 3: Mary Grey**

All these relationships she has had - yet this Samaritan woman has never been truly loved. Her wretchedness has simply worsened. J’s words touches her heart very deeply. He reaches to the deepest part of her. Yet, his is not a judgmental attitude - he understands the vulnerability of desperately poor women- they need the protection of men – for income, yes, but for physical protection too- against the sexual advances of other men.
The shame of this need, and the shame of her lifestyle goes deep – and Jesus reaches to it. He cuts through racial prejudice, gender barriers and moral ones. He uses the language of gift – “If you knew the gift of God…”

This challenge pierces us directly today: Can we receive God’s mercy without being open to it? Grace can be offered – but is it always received?

Reflection point 4 - Canon Paul:

Jesus's dialogue with the woman was remarkable because it broke all the rules. His disciples were horrified that Jesus should be speaking to a woman alone and a woman who was a Samaritan. He was breaking the sacred rules of ritual purity and he would have been regarded as shameful. And there is more, wells in biblical tradition had a particular significance. Wells were associated with the meeting of people like Jacob and Rachel. They spoke of an intimate relationship between a man and a woman. Such intimacy was not part of the relationship between this woman and Jesus. But the breaking of rules and the meeting at a well all speak of the fact that Jesus connects with each of us at the deepest level. Jesus goes to the woman's very heart. Responding to Jesus's mention of five husbands, the woman wonders if Jesus is a prophet and says to the people of Sychar that he had told her everything that she had ever done. In other words, Jesus knows her as she truly is and accepts her completely in love. Jesus's approach to her brought the woman to deeper and deeper faith, and her faith touched and influenced the people of her town.

Reflection point 5 - Mary Grey:

Ascending Epiphanies of mercy now occur. This is the glory of this passage!

Jesus speaks, asks for water - and we are given an epiphany of knowing as they each relate to each other on a different level - she on the physical and practical, he on the spiritual and metaphoric. Living water is what Jesus offers. Then he says, “Go, call your husband..” And reaches out to her actual situation. Now we are given an Epiphany of revelation, “Sir, I see you are a prophet”. And this evokes a response from him- “The hour is coming..” Amazing that he reveals his coming hour- the hour of
his death and Resurrection- to a poor Samaritan woman! Remember that at the Marriage Feast of Cana, (John 2), he told his own mother that “My hour is not yet come!” Yet he here he is telling this despised poor woman that it is now coming! Jesus’s revelation in turn calls forth an Epiphany of faith from her: “I know the Messiah is coming”. Then the culminating, second Epiphany of revelation from Jesus: "I who speak to you am He".

Reflection point 6 - Canon Paul:

I always feel sorry for the woman at the end. The people, in quite a sharp and disparaging way, tell the woman that they believe not because of what she told them but because of Jesus himself. This is as it should be and she accepts it. The sharp remark does not take away the great change that she has experienced and which is manifested in a tremendous joy. In that joy, which gave her the courage of a true evangelist, the woman invited the people of her town to "Come and see". These words resonate with the beginning of John’s Gospel when Jesus himself invited the disciples of John the Baptist to "Come and see". Those people came to faith in Jesus because of her.

The change and joy that she experienced is what mercy is about and it is a gift always being offered. The more we experience it the more we move forward and desire more mercy. The change in us and the joy we experience influences others and says to them, as she and Jesus did, "Come and see."