

SERMON FOR LENT 3 | 12.03.2023

Exodus 17:1-7; Romans 5:1-11; St John 4: 4-5, 19-26, 39-42

Who do you argue with? Perhaps you don't argue with anyone - although I would be a bit surprised if that were really true! At the micro level at home or the macro level in the BBC about freedom of speech or at the international level with the familiar issues of territorial supremacy in Ukraine or global warming, disputes rage endlessly.

While many arguments simply run along well-worn tracks and have a kind of inevitability about them, sometimes a good argument can clear the air – and can actually sort an issue out.

They stop burning resentments from hanging on, long well past their sell by date. People highly trained in conflict management and resolution may be few and far between but they usually have the ability to look at the problems with fresh eyes and the skill to move the people involved from their well-worn positions. The Good Friday agreement twenty five years ago, or the more recent Windsor Framework to replace the Northern Irish Protocol might just fit into that category.

In today's Gospel St John gives us, as his starting point, the familiar turf war between Jews and Samaritans.

For hundreds of years there had been a stand-off between the two tribes and St John's story sets us up with an intriguing dialogue between Jesus and a Samaritan woman who was obviously not wanting to be seen as she went to the well. This was midday, the hottest time of the day and she seemed to be keen to avoid meeting people if she could.

But Jesus is not put off. He starts the conversation by teasing her for not recognizing who he is. Which is a bit unfair as there was nothing about him to indicate that he was anyone other than a cheeky Jewish man who had forgotten to bring his travellers skin bucket and who ought to have known better than talk to a Samaritan housewife.

Then Jesus goes on to make a distinction between the dank still water that Jacob's well had provided over the years and the crisp, living water that he could give to people as a free gift.

Strangely the woman is not above joining in the banter: *who do you think you are; are you greater than the great prophet Jacob who dug this well?* She is a Biblical Mistress Quickly with plenty to say.

But Jesus, in the hands of St John, is slowly but surely drawing the woman into a deeper conversation and he says, *I want to give you living water that will mean you never have to keep coming back for more. This water will stop you ever being thirsty again because this spring leads the way to eternal life.*

And she would have picked up Jesus' reference to the psalms and in particular Psalm 42 which runs: *as the deer longs for flowing water, so my soul longs for God.* And we know from the Dead Sea Scrolls that this was a major theme in Jesus' day as both the Jews and the Samaritans were encouraged to look beyond the old squabbles about whether true worship happened on Mount Gerazim as the Samaritans believed, or in Jerusalem as the Jews thought. As Jesus says, this whole debate is now redundant because the greatest gift is not geographically located in one place or another but is to be found in a new relationship - in our friendship with Jesus himself.

And so the conversation moved on from a cup of water at Jacob's well to a discussion about the coming of the Messiah. No wonder the woman starts calling Jesus 'sir'!

And that might well have been enough. But Jesus can't resist seeing how far this rather theological discussion between two rival faiths could go so he starts getting personal. And his suggestion that she call her husband to join them quickly elicits the information that she has had five husbands already and that she wasn't actually married to the man she was currently living with. Jewish law only allowed someone to have three partners so it was no wonder she didn't want to meet anyone at the well: she was already something of an outcast.

But watch what happens: when Jesus tells her that he knows about all her past relationships - and is still prepared to talk to her; not only does her estimation of him grow so that she places him alongside the revered prophet Jacob, she is so enthused by his words that she leaves her precious bucket behind and rushes off into the town to tell everyone what an amazing man she has just met.

All the stigma has vanished and she has become yet another teller of the good news. All her fears have gone.

And it took a discussion, an argument even, and some deft questioning by Jesus, to turn a slightly embarrassing social meeting at a well into something life-affirming. Somehow a much-married female outcast was turned into a spokesperson for God.

Last night, two things happened which have made me reflect on this in a new way. At 5.30pm I went to the book launch of *'It's not how I remember it'* at the ARC Centre.

I haven't had time to read it all but in brief it contains the stories of those who lived on the old Packington estate here in south Islington before it was redeveloped nearly ten years ago.

Now most of us have heard the anecdotes of what it was like to live there between the 1970s and the early years of this century – about the police chases, the rival gangs, the famous Packington 'families', the violence, the drugs and the terrible reputation of Islington Green School. 'The Pack' was not a place for the feint hearted to live.

And yet this book, carefully researched over several years by a local history group who spent hours getting first hand experiences down on paper, also shows a very different side.

Listening more carefully than perhaps local journalists had tended to do as they sought to sell newspapers with sensational headlines, the authors of this little book have opened up a completely new vision of what local people thought and what they dreamed about on the Packington estate.

Then at 7.30pm, we held the third of our Lenten film nights here at St James', featuring two hourlong reflections on lines from the Ten Commandments.

And as we put things away afterwards I heard people saying how interesting they had found it - how the sparseness of the settings in Communist Poland had really enhanced the themes.

And I could not but reflect on how much I had hated the whole two hours: I pined for the boy lost under the ice, and felt so much for his father whose bad calculations had contributed to the accident; I hated the extended graphic pictures of the murder of a taxi driver in the second film and the subsequent hanging of the man responsible. I was well, well outside my comfort zone.

And yet – isn't that exactly what this exercise was all about? We all tend to feel more content with the familiar water of the well; however dank it may be! And still Jesus persists: *But I am offering you new water, flowing water which will never give out...*

As a parish we are beginning to face the challenges of an uncertain future. And we need good, serious debates - and disagreements and probably arguments - about St James' future.

As part of the '*Time to Dream*' process and as the Team begins to write the new Parish Profile we need to hear what each and every person thinks of the past, the present as well as the future - with an ability to come out of our comfort zones and to reach out for the living waters that Jesus is offering. Naturally perceptions will be very different and of course there will be times when people will say, '*that's not how I remember it!*'

Can we take courage in this story of how Jesus ventured into uncomfortable territory and changed fear into something new and positive? And can we learn to debate – and argue - with each other constructively, in order to see where God is taking this Church?