



Sermon: - 19th March 2017

Brief Encounter

Psalm 95; John 4: 5-42

Sometimes, in life, things can change in a heartbeat.

This is the transcript of an actual radio conversation between a US naval ship and the Canadian authorities off the coast of Newfoundland in October, 1995. The Americans had become aware that they were on a collision course with a smaller vessel which was showing up on their radar.

Americans: Please divert your course 15 degrees to the North to avoid a collision.

Canadians: Recommend you divert YOUR course 15 degrees to the South to avoid a collision.

Americans: This is the Captain of a US Navy ship. I say again, divert YOUR course.

Canadians: No. I say again, you divert YOUR course.

Americans: this is the aircraft carrier USS Lincoln, the second largest ship in the United States' Atlantic fleet. We are accompanied by three destroyers, three cruisers and numerous support vessels. I demand that you change your course 15 degrees north, that's one five degrees north, or counter-measures will be undertaken to ensure the safety of this ship.

Canadians: This is a lighthouse. Your call." In an instant, confronted with the truth, the perspective changes.

In today's gospel reading we meet the nameless woman from Samaria whose perspective is changed, whose life is transformed by a brief encounter at a well. I think we are all familiar with the story, and with the implications behind this encounter. We are told that it was about noon when Jesus sat by the well while the disciples went off to buy food. Normally, the women and children would draw their water in the early part of the day, while it was still cool, so this woman is either avoiding the other villagers or is shunned by them. This is presumably because she is seen as an immoral woman since she is living with a man who is not her husband. However, the fact that she has had five husbands before this

is a cause for compassion rather than censure. At that time it was the custom that when a man died his brother would marry the widow and assume responsibility for her, so this might explain why she has had more than one husband. However, it is unlikely that five husbands would have died. Another possible explanation is that she was divorced. In that culture a woman could not divorce a man therefore to dissolve a marriage required the man to divorce the woman. So this poor woman has either lost more than one husband through death or she has been divorced by more than one husband, in all five times over. After such a history is it really any surprise that she is now living with someone whom she has not married, but for this she has been ostracised from her community. She is indeed someone for whom we should feel compassion.

Into this situation steps Jesus and immediately transforms her life. The social barriers are enormous, and she knows this. She is a woman and he's a man and they should not speak with one another. She is an immoral woman and he's a rabbi and they should not have contact with one another. She is a Samaritan and he's a Jew and they should not associate with one another. We can picture her approaching the well, perhaps hesitating when she sees Jesus sitting there, but her need for water draws her on; she cannot go home without it. She will be anticipating drawing her water and leaving, ignored by this Jewish man sitting by the well. Imagine her surprise, then, when he speaks to her!

And then it gets complicated, as if it wasn't already complicated! She knows the barriers and boundaries which society has placed between her and Jesus but despite this, and taking courage from the fact that he has already stepped over these barriers and boundaries, she engages him in conversation. "You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?" Perhaps the novelty of the situation was appealing; someone actually willing to talk to her. His response is unexpected "If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water." And now she challenges him! "Are you greater than our father Jacob?"

In the dialogue which ensues she begins to realise that this person with whom she is engaged in conversation is no ordinary rabbi. He convinces her that he is indeed the Messiah for whom she is waiting and then she becomes a witness to the truth, drawing others to meet Jesus. When confronted with the truth, her perspective changes, and with her changed perspective she then takes the good news to others.

It's a strange conversation. From the commonplace subject of drinking water it moves to matters of spiritual significance and to worship. It's an insightful conversation and as it develops we learn about the obstacles that prevent us from experiencing true worship. The woman suggests that what matters is where you worship. In the same way sometimes we are tempted to settle for something less than true worship. We think that it is a particular event. Or that it only happens in a particular building. Sometimes we think it only refers to the music in the service. Indeed, the more modern hymns are often called worship songs to distinguish them from traditional hymns. From a biblical perspective music is indeed part of worshipping God, but Jesus does not speak of music here. In Romans 12:1, when the apostle Paul writes of worship which honours Christ he tells us to become living sacrifices. So what then, is true worship? It is worship which springs from our heart and soul and mind and strength in loving recognition of God's glory and love for us. True worship erupts in the soul of one who understands that Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away sin. He is the living water that cleanses and quenches the deepest thirst of one's soul. Using water as the metaphor for eternal life, Jesus opens her eyes to see him as the promised Messiah and Saviour.

In this brief encounter, a humble Samaritan woman is transformed from someone who is shunned by her community to someone who becomes a witness and a missionary to her community. Her understanding has been transformed from a shallow acceptance of the traditions she has grown up with to the deep engagement with the reality Jesus presents her with. He is the Messiah, he is worthy of worship, and true worship, like a spring of water, leaps from us in praise of all that he has done for us so that we cannot help but tell others. This woman left her water pot and returned to the village to tell others how to receive eternal life. Verse 39 reveals that many believed because of her testimony. True worship brings lost people to Jesus!

What can we glean from this for us today? We can learn that in our own encounter with Jesus we can expect to be changed. Jesus, if we let him, if we worship him in spirit and in truth, satisfies our deepest longings. In a brief encounter, if we open ourselves up to him, he can transform us. When Jesus speaks to us about living water and true worship, he invites us to explore the depths of His love through worship. May we never limit the Lord Jesus to a set time, place, or activity. True worship is giving ourselves to God, allowing him to set our priorities, to guide and to lead us, and change us into the image of his son.

But as we learn from the Samaritan woman, true worship does not end there. Her personal transformation spurred her to go and tell her community what had happened to her. And her brief and transforming encounter with Jesus led to their brief and transforming encounter with Jesus. This was an accidental encounter, this meeting between Jesus and the Samaritan woman, and so I'm wondering this morning whether, in our accidental encounters with others, we might become, for brief moment, Jesus to them. There are few people who feel comfortable speaking openly about their faith, and if we don't feel comfortable about it we're likely to do badly and in the end only make others feel uncomfortable too. But are there other ways that we can allow the transformation that Jesus has wrought in us to become the source of transformation for others? Do you remember, we are told that when Moses came down from the mountain with the 10 commandments, having spent time with God, his face shone so much that he had to wear a veil over his face for days. In the same way, when we give ourselves up to worship in spirit and in truth, when we open ourselves to the spirit of God to renew and transform us, we will shine; he will shine in us. When we drink of the living water, it becomes in us a spring welling up to eternal life, not just for us, but potentially for those we meet as well. So I want to leave you this morning with two questions. The 1st question is, when we have an encounter with Jesus how do we want to be transformed? Or, in other words, what difference do we want him to make in our lives? What do we say to him, and what does he say to us? And can we truly open ourselves up to the living waters and to worship in spirit and in truth?

And the second question is, in the brief encounters which we experience on a daily basis what can we do, how may we speak, that might reveal Christ to the other person? Perhaps this morning this should be our prayer, let us be the means of transformation, may we reflect Jesus, that in encountering us others also encounter him and in so doing know that this man really is the saviour of the world.