

Sermon by Bishop Richard Harries at St Mary's Barnes

10am service on 12th March 2023

3rd Sunday of Lent

I wonder what you made of the extraordinary conversation in that reading from John's Gospel between a Samaritan woman and Jesus. Can you really imagine anyone talking like that? Jesus asks the woman to give him a drink. She is shocked because normally Jews had nothing to do with Samaritans but Jesus tells her that if she knew who it was who was asking he would give her living water. Again, the woman is surprised, because the well contains still, not running water and she asks if he is greater than Jacob who gave the well, to which Jesus replies:

'Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again; but whoever drinks the water I shall give will never again be thirsty. The water I shall give will be a spring of water within him, welling up and bringing eternal life.'

It is difficult to imagine anyone talking like that, isn't it? But there is an even bigger question mark over this dialogue. All scholars are agreed that if you want to reconstruct the actual life and teaching of Jesus, then the basic facts will be given you in Mark's gospel. Now in Mark's Gospel the message of Jesus is the presence of the kingdom of God. His miracles there are a sign of God's rule breaking into this world. But in John's gospel the message is not the Kingdom of God, but Jesus himself.

Last Sunday's main reading, like today's and as they are all through Lent, was from St John's gospel, so let us reflect on this gospel, its difference from the others, and the implications of this for our Christian lives.

As I said, the main message of Jesus in Mark and the other synoptic Gospels, as they are called, Luke and Matthew is the proclamation of the Kingdom of God - its presence and the kind of people who belong to it. The main message in John's Gospel is Jesus himself as the revelation of that Kingdom.

Now you can try to find ways of reconciling this difference if you want, as the church has done for most of its history. Or you could say, Mark's gospel gives us a picture of the actual historical ministry of Jesus in his time and place and John

gives us a profound spiritual interpretation of the whole Christ event—Christ crucified, risen, ascended to the Father and present with us through the Holy Spirit. There is not total discontinuity between the two approaches. There is a basis of fact in John, and what John draws out is already implicit in Mark's Gospel. For example, in Mark Jesus clearly claims to teach and act in the name of God. John makes this explicit. The poet Robert Browning put it well in the 19th century in his long poem on the gospel when he has John saying, "What first were guessed as **points**, I now knew **stars**". The points of light which can be discerned in Mark turn out to be ablaze with light in John. For John sees Jesus not just as a historical figure but the eternal Christ dwelling in us through the Holy Spirit.

Everything in the New Testament is written up from the standpoint of faith and the conviction that Jesus had been raised from the dead, but John in particular lets it shape his whole Gospel. For him we might say it was not just about the past but the present and every present. That is why John's gospel has always been seen as the most spiritually profound of the Gospels. With that in mind look again at the key statement in the dialogue of Jesus with the woman

Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again; but whoever drinks the water I shall give will never again be thirsty. The water I shall give will be a spring of water within him, welling up and bringing eternal life.

In most people's lives there is what the poet George Herbert called 'a repining restlessness, a dissatisfaction, an agitation, a thirst for they know not quite what. Jesus says that the living water he will give them will quench that thirst for ever. They will find the lasting meaning and purpose in their lives. And the source of this will be within them, the Holy Spirit, for this unites our life with that of God and gives us the true life which nothing, not even death can destroy.

The living water is if you like the Holy Spirit forming Christ within us.

Now, as I say, you can believe that Jesus said those actual words in his ministry, and you will be in good company, the church throughout the ages and the vast majority of Christians round the world today. But if you find that difficult, think rather of John's Gospel as a profound work of spiritual art, the result of deep reflection on Christ crucified, risen, ascended to the Father and present with us through his Holy Spirit. The lived experience of one who set out what it means to believe in Christ in every age and culture.

Now if you take this latter point of view, it has a rather surprising, positive implication. For it means that the unique disclosure of God in Christ was not limited to Jesus in his historical ministry, but embraced those who experienced and interpreted that ministry. Now the whole New Testament is there because in one way or another it points to Christ. But being by limited, fallible human beings much of it is very ordinary. But some of it clearly takes us right into the mind of Christ, notably parts of St Paul and the author of the John. We can say of John, that this is indeed part of the revelation of God to us, as much as what Jesus actually said, because it takes us into the mind of Christ. This is indeed inspired scripture, not as a record of what happened but of what it is that Gods reveal to us in Christ as true for every age.

So we give thanks for the living water, the Holy Spirit, dwelling within us, uniting our lives with the Father, helping us to do his will in the service of others and giving us that quiet of heart and lasting fulfilment.