

Sharing our Faith: Proclaiming the Gospel

Today we come to the third and final sermon in our short series on 'Sharing our Faith'. During the first sermon I talked about sharing the joy of the gospel and the difference between joy and happiness, with joy being what Kay Warren calls: *'The settled assurance that God is in control of all the details of my life, the quiet confidence that ultimately everything is going to be all right, and the determined choice to praise God in all things.'* We looked at the *difference* that being a Christian makes to the way we *live* and the way we *love*, because it's how we live and love that makes people stop and ask why we believe.

Last week, in thinking about how we go and make disciples (following Jesus' great commission), Lottie added 'speak' to living and loving and spoke of how most of us love a good story. She asked us to think about why Jesus is good news to us – ways in which he's transformed our lives, where prayer has been answered, and to not be afraid to share our story with others when the opportunity arises. And it's really good to know in your own mind what it is about the gospel message that really captivates you, the one thing that makes you want to continue following Jesus and to think about how you could communicate that in a way that is attractive to others.

This week, I want to stay with story. You all know by now how much I love stories, listening to them and telling them. This week, I want you to think of your favourite story from the Bible – it can be from the Old Testament or the New – and what it is about this story that you could possibly share with someone else about why this particular story helps you believe in and follow Jesus. Because this is another simple way in which we can share our faith. On Monday morning, when someone asks what you did over the weekend and you say *'Well, I went to church'* and they reply, *'Church? Why did you do that? Surely you don't believe in all that?'* you could reply, *'Well, you know, there's this story in the Bible that makes a lot of sense to me...'* and you begin to tell the story. So, have a think for just a minute. Think about what that story might be for you.

For me, one of the most important stories in the Bible that makes me want to follow Jesus, is the story of the 'Woman at the Well', today's gospel reading. But I think I'd want to tell it in a more modern way. Listen first to this

meditation from Nick Fawcett, a wonderful storyteller, and you'll see what I mean:

He was full of surprises, that man, from the moment I first met him.
I thought he'd just push me aside like all the rest;
either that or walk away with his head in the air.
He was a Jew, remember, and I, a Samaritan;
and, worse than that, a woman, alone.
Yet, he stayed where he was, a smile on his face,
quite happy, apparently, to be associated with me.
Well, call me suspicious if you like, but I wasn't sure what he was up to,
so I asked him straight out, 'What's your game?'
He laughed at that, and then offered me a drink of water –
at least I thought that's what he was doing, though I wasn't sure.
You see, he had no bucket, and he could hardly shin down the well, could he?
So, where was this water he was on about meant to come from?
To be frank, I suspected he was pulling my leg,
but I was beginning to like him despite the nonsense he talked.
He had a nice way with him, kind, gentle,
a bit of 'all right' in an unconventional sort of way.
So I played along, wondering where it would all lead.
If only I'd known – what an embarrassment I might have saved myself.
I'll never know how he guessed,
but suddenly he looked straight at me
and for the first time I noticed his eyes.
They didn't undress you like so many men's seem to do,
but looked much deeper, almost as if into my very soul.
And then he started talking about my lovers,
my husbands, my past,
every detail correct.
It was uncanny, frightening, far too near the knuckle.
So, I tried to fob him off with some old chestnut about worship.
But even then he threw me;
none of the usual pat answers
but a response that reached right into the heart of the matter,
cutting through all the trivia.
And it was after that he produced the biggest surprise of all –
told me he was the Messiah!

I didn't know what to say, just stood there gawping, flabbergasted.

I mean, I realised he was a prophet, but the Messiah?

It couldn't be, I told myself, no way.

I went back down into the village, seeking reassurance, wanting someone to tell me he was just another religious nutcase.

But they didn't.

They were curious, wanted to see for themselves.

And when they heard him, listened to his teaching, they believed he was the Messiah too.

So, Monday morning, maybe at the hairdressers – Lynda: *'What did you do at the weekend? ... Church? Why did you do that? Surely you don't believe in all that?' ... You're a vicar? Whaaat? Why on earth would you want to be one of those? Seriously geeky!'*

'Well, you know, there's this story in the Bible that makes a lot of sense to me. It's a story about Jesus stopping on his way to Galilee at a well. There was a woman there and he asked her for a drink of water. They got into conversation and he told her everything about herself, stuff he couldn't possibly know. And she realised that this man wasn't just a prophet but was the son of God, the Messiah that had been promised down the ages. And, from that moment on, her life changed.'

'So, what's that got to do with you following Jesus? It's just a story isn't it?'

'You see, I follow a Jesus who, though he was tired – he'd been travelling all day in the hot sun – still had time for others. He sat down by the well, it was the hottest part of the day; he could have just closed his eyes and rested, waited till the disciples returned with food, but he didn't. He noticed the woman as she approached, and started a conversation with her.'

'So ...'

'I follow a Jesus who had *time* for the people no-one else had time for. You see, it wasn't just Jesus who seemed to know this woman's history – the whole village would have. And, with that history, she wouldn't have been someone that the other women wanted to mix with. That's why she was there at noon – the sixth hour after sunlight – because it was the hottest time of the day and no-one else would be as foolish to make the walk to the well and carry back a heavy load of water when the sun was at its highest. She was there because she was avoiding the other women, avoiding their rejection and her own

shame. She also wasn't someone that Jesus, a good Jew, should be talking to. It wasn't just that she was a woman, but she was also a Samaritan, a break off group from the Jewish religion. There was a lot of hatred and fear between these two groups and contact between them didn't usually end well. They tended to avoid each other. But Jesus doesn't. In fact, when she approaches, he asks her for a drink, they get into conversation and he starts to tell her stuff about herself - the stuff that others find awkward.'

'So what ...'

'So, I follow a Jesus who knows everything there is to know about me, and loves me just the same. And, like everyone else, some of that isn't pretty. I'm not perfect. I mess up. I say and do the wrong things. But this Jesus gets that.

'And I follow a Jesus who made such a difference in this woman's life that I know he can make a difference in mine. He doesn't judge or condemn her. He doesn't condescend or give her any moral lessons. He approaches her, a thirsty man, and asks her to do something for him. He creates a relationship with her. She, who has lost all trust in her own goodness, is trusted by Jesus. And, in trusting her, he uplifts her and gives her back her self-esteem. And he transforms her life. She rushes back to the village – she even forgets to take her water with her – and she tells others about him.

And you know, there are times when I feel like that woman at the well. When it feels everything is going wrong and I want to hide away. But I follow a Jesus who knows that we're all wounded in some way. We all have a history of broken relationships – some more than others. We all want to hide sometimes. But I also know that if I come to Jesus with that emptiness, that helplessness, that brokenness, then he can fill me with the strength of the Spirit and the touch of his love ... and he can do that for you too.'

I love the story of the 'Woman at the Well' because it resonates with me. I can picture myself in it. That makes it easier to share. There are other stories for which that's true too – the story of the Prodigal Son being one of them. But find a story that is meaningful to you and think about how you could share it with someone else, sharing in particular why it's significant for you.

And you know, what I love about this story is the bit that we didn't read, the bit that tells you how the story ends. And it's this:

vv.39-42. Many of the Samaritans from that town believed in him because of the woman's testimony, *'He told me everything I ever did.'* So when the Samaritans came to him, they urged him to stay with them, and he stayed two days. And, because of his words, many more became believers. They said to the woman, *'We no longer believe just because of what you said; now we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this man really is the Saviour of the world.'*

How wonderful that having received life from Jesus, this woman immediately gives life to others. The last person you would expect to be an evangelist. The people are amazed and astonished by the transformation that has taken place in her, and it's this transformation – how she *lives, loves* and *speaks* – that then becomes attractive to others. They want to know the reason behind it so they follow her, go and meet Jesus and ask him to stay with them. And here's the beauty of it. It's *her* words, *her* transformation that leads them to Jesus, but it's then *their* encounter with him that subsequently leads to their own transformation. She's not responsible for that: *'We now believe for ourselves'*, they say.

So, your challenge for this week. What story from the Bible could you weave into your own that, in the telling, might lead someone to want to know more about Jesus? And after the telling, how wonderful might it be to hear those words, as the woman from the well did: *'It is no longer because of what you said that I believe. I now believe for myself.'* Never underestimate the power of how you live, how you love and what you say. Jesus believes in you as much as he believed in the woman at the well, as unlikely an evangelist as there ever was. And know that, through the Holy Spirit, the presence of God is always with you.

Amen.