

## CREATING A CULTURE OF COURAGE

John 4:5-42

Coventry Cathedral

15 March 2020; Corrymeela Sunday

For the sake of community, we engage in social distancing. That seems a bit counterintuitive. Yet in order to protect the most vulnerable in society, we must keep our distance for the moment. Because we stand with those most at risk we choose not to stand right beside them. During this season of coronavirus we are being told – quite rightly – to avoid human-to-human contact, handshakes and hugs, enclosed spaces; to isolate ourselves if we show any signs or symptoms.

These are, as they say, exceptional times. But we need to remember just that: that these times are exceptional. This is not how it should be. Indeed, what I hear from our gospel reading for today is that (after the threat of COVID-19 has passed) you and I are to go out of our way to engage with others and to connect with those from whom we might otherwise distance ourselves. In a world and in an age when we are already withdrawing more and more from those we don't know, and retreating into bubbles of sterility and familiarity, the story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman speaks to another sort of sickness and to another kind of contagion. A wonderful kind of contagion. Here in the gospel we see the power of reconciliation transmitted from one courageous person to another, and then we see it infect an entire community – healing longstanding division.

### Social Distancing

We meet Jesus and this brave woman at noon on a hot day. They are together in one spot, yet separated by the cultural norms of their tribes. The male/female divide would probably have been enough to discourage conversation, but they are also ethnically segregated. Social distancing for them would have been the norm. Long ago, Jesus' Jewish ancestors were carted off into exile. And when they returned generations later, they encountered in their neighbours the ancestors of this Samaritan woman – who in remaining in their homeland had intermarried with others and changed their customs and become less Jewish and more something else. Something similar enough to be familiar but foreign enough to seem dangerous.

As is so often the case in the divisions of this world, the people who are just a degree or two dissimilar pose the greatest threat to our sense of self. Those of the same religion, but of a different sect. Those who speak our language but with a different accent. Those who live in our town but with a different shade of skin. Or those who seem absolutely normal until we learn that – gasp – they voted for the other side in the last election. And then they become wholly other.

The genius of Richard Howard in Coventry and Ray Davey at Corrymeela was to insist that we are more similar to the ones we count as strangers or threats or enemies than we like to admit. These leaders believed that if we show the courage to meet the people we hold at a distance, we will only meet people like us: people capable of great harm (yes) but also recipients of the same great grace – fellow invitees to a table of forgiveness, potential partners in God's reconciliation.

### Human to Human Contact

And so it is a courageous conversation – one that went against the culture and against built-in fears – that these two individuals in John's gospel engage in over that well. The encounter between Jesus and the Samaritan woman could have been full of contention. Instead, it reads like witty repartee.

Get me a drink, would you?

Who are you, to ask *me* for a drink?

Funny you should ask. I happen to be the one who can give you a drink of living water.

You can't give me a drink of living water. You don't even have a bucket.

Ha! You're right. Ok, fine. Go. Just go. Go get your husband and come back.

Hmph. See what you know! I don't even have a husband.

I do know. You have five husbands – and another man now.

OH. You're a prophet, are you? Well tell me, prophet, what's the story with the separation

between your people and mine? Hmm? Why do we worship here and you worship there?  
Ah. Now we're getting somewhere. Let me tell you this: soon it will not matter where one worships, so long as one worships in truth.  
Well, the truth I know is that our Messiah is coming, and that he will proclaim all things to US.  
And I know that the Messiah is here, and that I am proclaiming these things to YOU.

And there, in that marvellous exchange in which Jesus is as affected by this woman's moxie and she is by his strangeness – an incredible transformation occurs. Their sense of 'us' changes. Forever. She is infected with the good news from this human to human contact. She thought that the Messiah would come to 'us' – meaning her people, but here is this Jewish man, this sworn enemy, and she now believes that he is the Messiah: the Messiah for the Jews, the Messiah for the Samaritans, the Messiah for all who worship in truth, for all of us. The new us.

Jesus, too, after his encounter with the Samaritan woman shows signs of cross-contamination, of an advanced stage of his condition. He starts talking differently to his own disciples – who are still immune to much of his message. He starts talking about wider work, a greater spread, a full-on pandemic. 'You're seeing just part of the story, friends,' he cryptically tells his followers. 'The fields are ripe for harvest; others, others have been labouring; others are a part of this joint work of ours. Others are a part of our OUR story. There is a new us.'

In some ways, this woman is patient zero. She goes home and infects her entire community. More and more Samaritans start showing symptoms of a new reality. They seek Jesus out for themselves. They engage courageously with a foreigner. And they walk away convinced for themselves that Jesus is the Saviour of the World. Not just the Saviour of the Jews. Not just the Saviour of the Samaritans. Not just the Saviour of those who suss it out. The Saviour of the World. Regardless of what this declaration says about Christianity's relationship with other faiths or with non-believers, the miracle here is that for those who come into direct contact with Jesus the narrowness of their thinking of who belongs utterly changes. Those who had been outsiders are now included. A new us.

### **The Contagion of a New Us**

Which bring us back to us. In this current crisis, in the context of a virus like corona, contagion is something to be contained. Right now social distancing is good. We wash our hands and avoid contact with others—not so much to protect ourselves, but to protect others more vulnerable than we. Paradoxically, we acknowledge our one-ness with others, our community, by withholding ourselves at times. By NOT coming together as one. By imposing healthy and protective boundaries when necessary. But in the context of the gospel, contagion is to be welcomed. What is needed in this age of ours is the courage to engage with those from whom we might otherwise withdraw – the courage to acknowledge our one-ness with those we wrongly label as enemy, as other, as less worthy, as dangerous, as hopelessly lost. In light of the gospel, our tendency toward social distancing is not the cure, but the disease. It is the sickness of thinking only of ourselves.

And so, once the coronavirus has run its course, once we have returned to whatever normal comes to mean, and once we have let the good news of this coming Easter completely infect us, the challenge will arise to create a culture of courage. We can take inspiration from the Samaritan woman. We can take inspiration from the community she infected. We can take inspiration from the good news that became a pandemic at Pentecost. That little band of frightened followers became a church of contagion, a courageous church that stepped out onto the streets of a vibrant city and engaged with strangers of every background and every tongue – shaking hands and hugging with abandon – knowing that Jesus is the Saviour of the World.

The gospel of Jesus Christ is the good news of a new us. The good news that we need not separate ourselves from those we count as other. The good news that we can protect the vulnerable while staying in community. The good news that even in everyday conversations like the one Jesus and this woman had over a drink of water – you and I can create a courageous and contagious culture, one that proclaims that together is better.