

Corrymeela Sunday 2017

Sermon at Leicester Cathedral on the encounter between a Jewish man and a Samaritan Woman from the fourth chapter of John's gospel.



Corrymeela supports reconciliation between divided people, providing opportunities that diminish fears and divisions through programmes of peace and reconciliation.

For more information visit our website or join us on one of our open programmes. You are very welcome. For Easter 2017, we invite you to Carafest, a festival of faith and reconciliation. corrymeela.org/carafest

For further resources on understanding conflict and interpersonal dynamics through the lens of the Sunday Gospels, see spiritualityofconflict.com

An Crinniú

A Íosa, uisce na beatha,
Is tusa ár dtobar agus ár bhfáilte
agus i gcomhrá
- tusa linne agus sinn leatsa -
- caimsítear filíocht ár saoil

Go gcuardaímid
an comhrá céanna seo
idir muintir réabtha.

Go dtabharfaimid
ár scéalta agus ár mbrón
ár gcaointe agus ár saolta
chuig a chéile
san áit roinnte, sábháilte seo

Agus mar sin pobal a aimsiú in
áiteanna iontach aisteacha
Amen.

The Collect:

Jesus, water of life
You are our well and our welcome
and in conversation
— us with you and you with us —
we find the poetry of our lives.

May we search
for this same conversation
between divided peoples.

May we bring
our stories and our sadness
our laments and our lives
to each other
in this shared place.

And so find community
in strange and surprising places.
Amen.

Good morning dear friends. I bring with me the thanks and prayers of the Corrymeela Community this weekend.

Every year, around St.Patrick's day, we mark Corrymeela Sunday, a Sunday where we turn with the lectionary texts towards reconciliation. As Corrymeela we were nurtured and supported for so many years through financial generosity, prayers and support for the vision of reconciliation by many many congregations and groups throughout Britain. We come each year to thank you for this generosity, and to turn again, together, towards the vision of reconciliation that is so important for our world. So thank you to all those at the Cathedral who have been so welcoming and warm with this opportunity to share faith, love and hope with you in Leicester Cathedral.

The text of the gospel today is a rich one. In it, we encounter a woman, a Samaritan woman whose conversation with Jesus is so engaging.

Before we go into the text, however, I wonder when the last time was that you had a wonderful and engaging conversation. I remember once waiting for a delayed bus and having an hour-long conversation with a man who had, for a decade, been the lighthouse keeper on Rathlin Island, the island just off the coast where Corrymeela is. He had worked in that lighthouse from 1970 to 1980. We were speaking around 2008, and it was his first time back to pay a visit. He spoke about being lighthouse keeper during storms, during times when the island was cut off, throughout the troubles, thinking of making dangerous seas navigable, all the while being glad he was off the mainland of Ireland where so many places were not navigable. It's ten years since I met him, and I never got his name, but I remember that conversation with great joy.

And I remember a conversation with with Josiah, a five year old Zambian boy. His parents were my colleagues and they had moved country for work. I asked Josiah what it was like to move country and he looked at me. There was never any rush with Josiah. He was a calm solemn child. He thought about my question and said "Do you know what fear is?"

Or another time, I was on a bus in New Zealand and on the bus,I met a Māori woman who was the local mediator in settlement dialogues between the Māori population of her area and the New Zealand government. She was a lawyer and a mediator. Her grandmother had been a Queen. We spoke about land, and language and treaties and the breaking of treaties and reparation in light of broken treaties and patience, and compromise and resistance. It was a long bus journey, and she had so much that was so interesting, and by and by, others on the bus turned and we all listened and asked questions and learnt.

One of the features of a good conversation is, I think, that we can remember the details for many years, even if other details — the name of the conversation partner, or their face, or other details — become more hazy. A conversation — whether with someone we know well, or someone who is, and remains, a stranger — is an experience of intimacy. We can disclose all kinds of important and private information in a conversation.

Conversations, especially unexpected ones, can happen in the folds between the events of our day. We are waiting for a bus, we are delayed, we are in a space with someone and the best thing to do is to make conversation and when a good conversation occurs we are surprised at how curiosity and interest make time pass in a more enjoyable way. The things we had thought would be the substance of our day are soon forgotten and the conversation can stay with us for decades.

I say all of this because the conversation we hear about between Jesus of Nazareth and this Samaritan woman whose name we do not know must have had the quality of memory. In order for the writer of the gospel of John to record details a conversation about their conversation survived from the encounter between Jesus and her, to Jesus' recounting of this conversation to the disciples, to the tradition of keeping note of these details of Jesus' life to the recording of this by the artists who put together the fourth gospel. We hear of how Jesus and she engaged in a theological discussion about some of the sticking points between Jewish and Samaritan communities. We hear also, surviving through this theological discussion, elements of delight and surprise and linguistic playfulness in her language, her immediacy of thought, her preparedness to engage and to narrate the moments of surprise.

She was attentive to the surprise of the moment. When Jesus spoke to her, and asked her for water, she wasn't someone who kept things quiet to think about them later. Her intellect and heart and curiosity were all immediately present to her. "You're an unusual man" she seems to be saying, for speaking to me. She was curious about him, and curious about his curiosity of engagement with her.

Jesus promises her life and water and refreshment. And she wants to know more. And he asks her to get her husband, and there is a story about this, and Jesus seems to know much of her story.

Much has been made about her story. She has had five husbands and the man she lives with now is not her husband. Is this a scandal? Is she being portrayed as a stereotype of

woman, or a loose woman? That may be too easy. The Eastern Orthodox Church celebrate her as equal to the apostles, as a disciple, evangelist and theologian who perceived truth in the midst of human encounter.

The five husbands - the assumption is always to "blame" this unnamed Samaritan woman for her five husbands. Was there a war? Was there a plague? Had she any choice in the matter of who she'd been married to? We know nothing about her. We know she has come to the well at a time when others from her village are not there, and that she engages in conversation with a stranger.

We can guess that she came to the well expecting to be alone, but her expectations were not met. She met someone there, conversation with whom was intellectually and personally stimulating. She spreads the word of goodness and invitation to her community.

At Corrymeela we seek to be a place where conversations can happen. Each year we welcome thousands of people to our programmes; programmes of peace and reconciliation programmes bringing young people from across racial, religious and political divides to a place of encounter where conversations can happen. These conversations happen in the formal group sessions. We know, though, that if you're doing community well, that the most important conversations will happen in the in-between spaces, so we create temporary communities of people, sharing meals, helping with washing up, with tea breaks and with places for walks and talking.

When people have been divided, the imagination suffers. The imagination about the other moves towards stereotyping or caricaturing extremes, and the richness of curiosity, imagination, conversation, unexpected human connection all suffers. The other becomes a trope, a blank canvas for constricted thinking.

For decades we have been honoured to be a place where people come to share words with each other. They ask important questions about each other. And by simple practices of hospitality, words that are substantial, important, needing-to-be-believed words, can be exchanged.

People have carried their pain with them: the pain of sectarian separation; the pain of a border that has been, and maybe still will be, a wound; the effects of grief and murder; the fear that became a mother tongue. These things, even though many are not to blame, still

cause the depth of shame that can be isolating. We need to find ways of speaking words of life from places that have felt like death.

When Jesus of Nazareth asked this Samaritan Woman about her husbands, I often think that he was communicating to her "I know something about how people look at you." This wasn't something that was her fault. She, I think, was a person upon whom other people's hostility was piled. Human encounter calls us to recognise that beneath all of the things that cause us to be isolated in a community we have an original dignity, intellect, curiosity and wonder from which to share.

She rushed back to the village. "Come and see" she says, echoing the words of Jesus who, when people asked him where he lived said "Come and see". Even if they hated her previously, this doesn't seem to be the burdening issue for her now. She'd left her water jar behind her. She had something that wasn't based on externals. She had something to share. The Theologian of the Well Water, the Patron Saint of Good Conversation, The Mother of the Good Question. Let us be like her, asking and asking and asking until we find the water of life in places that are parched.