

A sermon preached by Bishop Brian Farran at S. Bede's Church, Beechboro on Lent 3 2005.
(Based on John 4: 1-42)

Much ordinary conversation is explanation. We explain to others what we have done, why we have done it, even who we are. Our explanations are always in a narrative form. We tell stories to account for our actions, for our identity, for our beliefs, and for our relationships.

At wedding celebrations, when all have eaten well and drunk well, there are speeches about the bride and groom. These speeches set out to develop a picture of the happy couple - how they met, what attracted each to the other, what foibles each has, as well as trying to embarrass them publicly.

So we are familiar with the use of story to provide information about personal identity, about the nature of communities, about belief systems and about faith too. Indeed, having just endured five weeks of state electioneering, the public have listened to all kinds of stories - little short, sharp pieces - that have tried to elicit our votes. And in the matter of the referendum too, there have been short stories trying to persuade us to say 'yes' or 'no'.

We explain ourselves to each other by telling stories. You want to know who I am, well, listen to my story. Story-telling has been a constant in human history. Hence, our love of drama, of television soaps, of novels, even of conversation.

On a wider dimension, congregations are an aggregate of individual stories. Many of you have been together in this congregation for a very long time. Your stories have intersected. Maybe there have been short snatches of personal stories over coffee or as you walked to your cars. Other times, the story-telling has been much more intentional through lengthy telephone conversations or a shared coffee.

As the bishop, I have come to think of each congregation as an individual more than as a collection of people. In fact, it is my experience as I move around Sunday by Sunday, that each congregation has its own identity, its own character and that these characteristics (although broadly Anglican) differ markedly.

In other words, a group can be represented very adequately by one member. Often, I think, there is one member of a congregation who seems to represent the overall characteristics of the congregation. Well, you might like to think about this observation in terms of the congregation of Beechboro - who is it here that most likely represents the whole congregation?

I have tried to get you thinking about how we use stories to explain who we are and to account for what we have done. I have introduced the idea that an individual can in personality and character represent a wider group of which that person is a member.

I have proceeded this way in order to help you appreciate the method that the gospel writer John uses in chapters 3 and 4. In chapter 3 the focus was on a conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus who represented the theology of the Jews. In chapter 4 the woman whom Jesus meets at the well represents the theology of the Samaritans. In these two conversations, John is explaining the relationship between Judaism, the Samaritans and the Christian community of which he is a member.

Let me take you deeper into this conversation with the woman at the well. Remember she is not just an individual, but a person in the story who represents a wider group of people, the Samaritans. Some Samaritans are obviously members of the church of which John too is a member. The question is, how did this situation come about? Remember the disdain towards the Samaritans from the Jews. In the other three gospels it is clear that Jesus did not much to do with the Samaritans, if anything at all. So, how can it be explained that Samaritans for whom the Jews had fierce antagonism are members of the Christian community? John tells a story about the meeting of Jesus (through the mission of John's church) with Samaritan religion. Let us get some perspective on this.

In the gospel of Luke in 9:52,53 we are told explicitly that the Samaritans refused to receive Jesus and in Matthew 10:5 that Jesus commanded the Twelve whom he sent on mission not to enter any town of the Samaritans. Furthermore, Acts 8 recounts what seems to be the first Christian mission to Samaria initiated after the stoning of Stephen.

In all likelihood, this episode in Samaria is not an historical event in the life of the earthly Jesus. What we have is a constructed story that legitimates the Samaritan mission and that establishes the full equality in the Johannine community between Samaritan Christians and Jewish Christians. The story presents this equality as resting on the fact that both groups were evangelized by Jesus himself, who, in the theology of this gospel, is no less immediately present to those who 'have not seen and yet have come to believe' as to those who saw him in his earthly life (**John 20:29**).

In this story the theological issues dividing the Samaritans and Jews are faced and resolved with a reaffirmation of Jewish legitimacy as bearer of the covenant faith and a surprising recognition of the essential validity of the Samaritan faith tradition.¹ The early church had to wrestle with divisive issues, just as the church of today does. In fact, there has **never** been a period when the church has not been called upon to resolve issues that had the possibility of fracturing the unity of the church.

As we look at the sequence of John's Gospel, we will note that the story of this woman is placed between Nicodemus, the Jewish authority who failed to recognize Jesus as Messiah (last week's reading), and the Royal Official, a pagan authority, who does recognize Jesus' life-giving power and who exercises faith. These are all representative figures.

The Samaritan woman represents or symbolizes those Samaritans who became Christians. So those commentators who focus on this woman as a shady lady with a suspect sexual past have misunderstood the text. She is no desperate housewife! (sorry channel 7).

A second clue to the woman's identity and role is her conversation with Jesus. The discussion is from the outset religious and theological. It is not personal.

The woman begins by questioning Jesus' breaking with Jewish tradition, first by speaking to a woman in public and asking to share utensils with a Samaritan, and second by his implication, in the offer of *'living water'* that he is on a par with the patriarch Jacob who gave the well to Israel. Remember they are drinking water at Jacob's well. The theology of the Samaritans emphasized the patriarchs and Moses, whilst that of the Jews emphasized David and the Kings. So, for this woman Jesus' claim to be on a par with Jacob has significant theological implications.

The woman recognizes Jesus as a prophet (v19). She asks the theological question of the day, where true worship is to take place. According to Samaritan theology, the messiah would be, not a descendent of David (as the Jews maintained) but a prophet like Moses. This woman is investigating Jesus on a theological dimension. The issue of true worship is an issue about the Messiah.

Now, I cannot scrutinize every detail of this conversation, but the tone throughout is theological. Issues that have divided Jews and Samaritans for a very long time are under interrogation. The end result in this episode is that through this woman the Samaritans become believers in exactly the same pattern as others do in John's gospel.

That is, they are introduced to Jesus by another, and then after contact or conversation with Jesus, they believe for themselves. Those who also fit this pattern include the two disciples of John the Baptist, Simon, Nathaniel, and Thomas who believed the Risen Christ.

In each case the pattern is the same: someone is brought to Jesus through the word of another but comes to believe in Jesus definitively because of Jesus' own word. This is a process of mission that we as a church should note.

However, there is one piece of this story that we should examine further for it tends to seduce the reader into thinking that we are in fact dealing with a loose woman who has been caught out in the conversation by none other than Jesus. We think of it as the ultimate embarrassment!

The level of implicit sexual imagery in this story is a result of the type of story this conversation at the well is. There is a biblical pattern of stories that recount the meeting of future spouses at a well. These spouses play a central role in the theological history of the Jews. We find this pattern in the story of Abraham's servant finding Rebecca, the future wife of Isaac, at the well of Nahor; Jacob meeting Rachel at the well in Haran; and Moses receiving Zipporah as wife after his rescue of the seven daughters of Reuel at the well in Midian.

In this story in John's gospel, Jesus meets the woman at the most famous well of all, Jacob's well (a symbol of Israel) although geographically it is in Samaria. Jesus in chapter 2 of John's gospel has already been identified at Cana as the true Bridegroom who supplied an abundance of good wine for the wedding feast (an image of the Kingdom of God), and by John the Baptist as the true Bridegroom to whom God has given the New Israel as bride (**John 3:27-30**). Now this new Bridegroom comes to claim Samaria as integral to the New Israel, the Christian Community.

The marital theme is explicit in all of these allusions that precede this conversation with the Samaritan woman. When the conversation moves on to 'the five husbands', this is not a quote by Jesus from The Sunday Times! Rather, it is a reference to the infidelity of the Samaritans to the Mosaic covenant when the remnants of the northern tribes of Israel returned from their Assyrian captivity. They accommodated the worship of the false gods of five foreign tribes (**2Kings 17: 13-34**). Samaria's commitment to Yahweh was tainted by false worship and therefore even the 'husband' she now has (a reference to Yahweh, the God of the Mosaic Covenant) was not really her husband because of the blended religion (syncretism) Samaria had accepted.

In other words, the entire conversation between Jesus and the woman is the 'wooing' of Samaria into full covenant faithfulness in the New Israel by Jesus, the New Bridegroom. It has nothing to do with the woman's private moral life, but with the covenant life of the community - that in Jesus the covenant of God is fulfilled and developed to a new level of self-giving.

This interpretation of John 4 brings us into a world essentially characterized by an astonishing, even shocking, inclusiveness. Jesus goes to Samaria, the land of the hated 'other', to confront and to heal the ancient divisions and to integrate into the New Covenant not those who were merely ignorant of, but those who had been unfaithful to, the Old Covenant. No one is excluded, no one may be excluded, from the universalist reign of the Saviour of the world.²

The theme of this conversation between Jesus and the Samaritans (the woman at the well) continues in encounters between the church and those who feel excluded from the church, or even between the church and those whom the church feels it must exclude. The radical inclusiveness of Jesus finds limited imitation with us. We are ready to exclude.

I suggest that we practice the 'wooing' of the excluded -especially those who feel deeply alienated from us- through reflective conversations that draw upon the preaching of Jesus, the One who embodies the compassion of God.

What then is the conversation -in the tradition of Jesus and the Samaritan woman- that this

congregation needs to have with the parent community of the school, your most immediate and adjacent mission-field?

Notes:

1. Sandra Schneiders, The Revelatory Text, Harper Collins, San Francisco, 1991, p.185.
2. *ibid*, p.187.