

(3) A new assurance

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[0 : 00] This morning's reading comes from John, chapter 4, verses 27 to 42.

These are on page 1072 in the Church Bibles. Starting at verse 27. Just then his disciples came back.

They marvelled that he was talking with a woman. But no one said, what do you seek, or why are you talking with her? So the woman left her water jar and went away into town and said to the people, Come, see a man who told me all that I ever did.

Can this be the Christ? They went out of the town and were coming to him. Meanwhile the disciples were urging him, saying, Rabbi, eat. But he said to them, I have food to eat that you do not know about.

So the disciples said to one another, Has anyone brought him something to eat? Jesus said to them, My food is to do the will of him who sent me, and to accomplish his work.

[1 : 12] Do you not say, There are yet four months, then comes the harvest? Look, I tell you, lift up your eyes, and see that the fields are white for harvest. Already the one who reaps is receiving wages and gathering fruit for eternal life, so that sower and reaper may rejoice together.

For here the saying holds true, One sows and another reaps. I sent you to reap that for which you did not labour. Others have laboured, and you have entered into their labour.

Many Samaritans from that town believed in him because of the woman's testimony. He told me all that I ever did. So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them, and he stayed there two days.

And many more believed because of his word. They said to the woman, It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is indeed the Saviour of the world.

Thanks Laura very much indeed for reading, and I'll be grateful to keep John chapter 4 open on page 1072.

[2 : 38] We prayed already, so we shall begin. This is the second in our series of talks from John chapter 4. We usually work through a book of the Bible like this on Sunday mornings, or at least part of the book of the Bible week by week, rather than kind of jumping around looking at different parts of the Bible.

The reason we do that is because of our conviction as Christians that the Bible is God speaking to us, and therefore by working through a book of the Bible in this way, we ensure that God is the one who sets the agenda, and we can't sort of pick and choose just the bits of the Bible which we happen to like, or miss out bits of the Bible which we find unpalatable.

That's why we tend to do this week by week, to work through books or parts of books of the Bible. Now I recently came across a government survey listing the household objects most likely to cause accidents.

The statistics were compiled from hospital reports, and in one year, I think it was 2002 or 2003, something like that, 10,773 cases were treated for accidents caused by socks and tights.

So just beware next time you put your socks on. 5,495 were caused by trousers, 1,317 by beanbags, and 37 by tea cases.

[4 : 08] So next time you make that pot of tea, be warned. One woman apparently was burned while ironing the trousers she was wearing. Not a good idea.

Jane Eason of the Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents, commenting on statistics, said, people assume they are safest in the home, but you're more likely to have an accident there than anywhere else.

Well, perhaps if you were here last week, you began to see that Jesus Christ is not a safe figure. I think we began to see that in John chapter 4.

That he claims to be God in the flesh. And therefore, we saw that he alone offers eternal life. He alone offers access to God and true worship of God.

And we saw, didn't we, that he went sort of baptised, so to speak, the kind of superstitious British faith, that while on the one hand it says it believes in God, and perhaps it's even happy to talk about God, and to talk about spiritual things, on the other hand, that is all fine, as long as it never makes any demands on my life.

[5 : 20] And Jesus will not kind of baptise that sort of superstition. The picture of gentle Jesus, meek and marvellous, that is perhaps so much part of our culture, is actually far removed from the authentic Jesus as we meet him in the pages of the Bible.

His teachings are uncomfortable, and he shatters conventional religious platitudes. Now, this section which we're looking at in John 4 today is part of what we began to look at last week. We looked at verses 1 to 26 of chapter 4 last week. If you missed the talk, do listen to it on the web. Here is a lady who meets with Jesus. She's had five husbands, and she is cohabiting with her current lover.

And we said last week, didn't we, she is not the kind of person you would imagine would ever meet anyone respectable. Yet this is the day that she met with Jesus Christ. And we have the privilege of listening in, so to speak, on the conversation and on what happens.

It's an encounter that profoundly changed her, and I think profoundly changes us, and should profoundly change us, in the way in which we view Jesus, and today supremely, the way in which we view the world in which we live.

[6 : 40] Now, on the outline on the back of the service sheet, you'll see there are two points, and we're going to look at those each in turn. First of all, Jesus Christ, the Saviour of the world.

Jesus Christ, the Saviour of the world. And have a look back with me at verses 22 and 23, which we looked at last week. As Jesus says to her, you worship what you do not know.

We worship what we know. For salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth.

For the Father is seeking such people to worship him. I wonder if you can see there, that Jesus is saying that in the past, in the Old Testament, that God revealed himself to one people, to one race. Salvation, as he says, is from the Jews. Indeed, the temple building at the very heart of Jerusalem symbolised the presence of God dwelling with his people.

[7 : 46] However, says Jesus, verse 23, a new age is now dawning. From now on, knowledge of God, worship of God, will no longer be tied to a particular place, it will no longer be tied to a particular people group, or nation, or building.

Instead, from now on, true knowledge of God will be in Jesus Christ, because he alone reveals God. Now, it may well be that if we were here last week, we found that sort of teaching very difficult to come to terms with.

It may offend our cultural presuppositions. After all, we live in a hyper-tolerant culture, where the great crime is to say that anyone else could possibly be wrong.

And therefore, of course, when Jesus says that he alone offers access to God, that he alone is God, and therefore by implication that every other religious system does not offer access to God, why, it totally cuts across, doesn't it, the grain of our culture.

Well, if you want to ask more about that, do raise it in question time at the end. But it's because Jesus offers these things that he now goes on in verses 28 to 30.

[9 : 09] That is what explains what now happens. Have a look at verse 28. So the woman left her water jar and went away into town and said to the people, come, see a man who told me all that I ever did.

Can this be the Christ? So they went out of the town and were coming to him. Now I wonder if in your mind's eye you can just picture what is happening here in verse 30.

As these Samaritans, as these non-Jews, flock to Jesus, pouring out the town to Jesus. And what's more, verse 39, as we look on, they believe in Jesus.

We're told many Samaritans in that town believed in him because of the woman's testimony. He told me all that I ever did. What's more, it's not an eye-spaced incident.

So look on to verse 41 and we're told, and many more believed because of his word. And again, verse 42, they say to the woman, it is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves and we know that this is indeed the Saviour of the world.

[10:27] It's a wonderful climax, isn't it, to the chapter. Jesus Christ is the Saviour of the world. In other words, he's not some sort of local deity, the God of some but not others.

No, eternal life, true knowledge of God is found in Jesus Christ. He is the Saviour of the world. And one of the great lies, one of the great British lies about religion is that my religion is my own business and no one else's.

I wonder if you've come across that kind of thinking. Religion is my own affair. So I'm not going to talk about it over lunch with colleagues or at the school gate, just so I won't talk about politics or money or other such forbidden subjects.

And because religion is my own private affair that I happen to believe in, then it doesn't really matter what other people believe as long as it's something that they feel comfortable with.

Now obviously we all have freedom of conscience. but it is a terrible distortion of that freedom to say that what people believe in is their own private business and is not open to challenge.

[11:47] That is not freedom of conscience. That is simply indifference. Now of course if our religion is simply a sort of mild blend of superstition and observing a few outward religious practices, then we can keep them to ourselves.

And frankly it's probably best that we do keep them to ourselves. But if it is a real living knowledge of Jesus Christ who is the saviour of the world, then that kind of sort of privatised view of religion, it's alright for you if it happens to sort of chime in with who you are and that kind of thing, that sort of privatised view of religion is a total denial of who Jesus is.

Now I guess one obvious reaction is simply to say that we don't like this teaching of Jesus because it's so exclusive and it may well be that many of us have had friends or family who have said that kind of thing to us.

But actually of course the opposite is the case here. These are Samaritans who are flocking to Jesus. For religious Jews of the first century, they were the untouchables.

That's the whole point of this chapter in John's Gospel. Jesus has come for everyone. Back in John chapter 3 we saw that Jesus has come even for a Nicodemus, for an upright, religious, moral man that's the cross between a bishop and an MP.

[13:17] Well in John chapter 4 we see he has also come for people at totally the other end of the spectrum, even a Samaritan woman such as this.

See Jesus has come for everyone. He invites all of us, anyone to believe in him. And therefore of course you couldn't get much more inclusive than that could you?

You may know that this is one of the reasons why in India there's been an increase in violence against Christians in recent years. It's because many of the former untouchables are coming to believe in Jesus and the high castes do not like it.

Jesus is the saviour of the world. His truth claims are only exclusive if we reject his claims. But then of course we're excluding ourselves.

Indeed I guess it's fair to say isn't it that one of the misconceptions that we're often under is that Christianity is essentially a Western religion. Which again is simply not true. These events we're reading about the events of the Bible that happened in the Middle East not in Britain or America.

[14:31] And today if you look at the number of Christians across the globe while those in the West as we might call it are in by far a minority. Where is the church growing the fastest?

It's in places like India or China. Indonesia much of Africa and South America. Which of the countries is sending the most missionaries across the globe?

It's a country like Korea. In other words the Vicar of Bibly idea of Christianity that Christianity is there to kind of preserve a rather quaint way of English life found mainly in the home counties is totally contradicted by this teaching of Jesus Christ in John chapter 4 not to mention by the reality of the church across the world today.

Jesus is the saviour of the world which is why it's right that at Grace Church for example we are concerned for world mission. It's why it's such a good thing that we have mission partners in Belgium and in South Africa.

It's why our partnership with Holy Redeemer Straton is so important because it helps us to look beyond our sort of cultural tribe so to speak. So then first of all Jesus Christ is the saviour of the

world.

[15:53] But secondly here's the implication it is harvest time. It's harvest time. Verses 31 to 38. Now I wonder if you spotted the way in which John writes here.

It's always important I think when we're looking at the Bible not only to ask what is the Bible saying to us but also how is the teaching which we have in the Bible arranged? How is the writer John in this case?

How is he writing? How is he communicating? What are you saying? And this whole section we're looking at today verses 27 to 42 is arranged as a kind of sandwich.

So in verses 27 to 30 and 39 to 42 on the outside of the sandwich so to speak we have the Samaritans flocking to Jesus and coming to believe in him and then in the middle of the sandwich in verses 31 to 38 Jesus shows the significance of what is happening and those are what we're going to go and think about now.

Now in verses 31 to 32 you'll see that Jesus' disciples have missed out on this discussion that Jesus has been having with a woman because they've been off the task going to be buying their supper. Well they now return and they say to Jesus look it's time to eat.

[17:07] Well look at Jesus' reply verse 32 he said to them I have food to eat that you do not know about. So the disciples said to one another has anyone brought him something to eat?

Jesus said to them my food is to do the will of him who sent me and to accomplish his work. Just as last week when Jesus spoke to the woman at the well he used the picture of physical water to describe the eternal life that he offers her so now he does a similar thing with physical food talking about the work that he has come to do.

And the reason he says he's engaged in God's work is explained in verse 35. Do you not say he says there are yet four months then comes the harvest look I tell you lift up your eyes and see that the fields are white for harvest already the one who reaps is receiving wages and gathering fruit for eternal life so that sower and reaper may rejoice together.

Now as far as I'm aware there aren't any farmers here this morning but Jesus' language is not hard to understand is it? In the physical world of farming there are times of inactivity times of waiting but in the spiritual realm says Jesus the harvest is here already.

Now look says Jesus to his disciples look at all these Samaritans flocking to me here's the harvest open your eyes can't you see it before you? And it's no ordinary harvest verse 36 it's a harvest of eternal life and there'll be a huge crop the sower and the reaper will be glad together.

[18:57] This says Jesus is everything the Old Testament was waiting for. Verse 38 I sent you to reap that for which you did not labour others have laboured and you have entered into their labour.

Here then are the Old Testament prophets who laboured who prepared for the coming of Jesus Christ at that time God was revealing himself to one nation to the Jews but now that Jesus is here why the harvest is here and it's a great harvest I want to see the link between the fact that Jesus is the saviour of the world and the fact that Jesus also says that it is harvest time.

You see why does Jesus coming into the world mean that it's time for the harvest? Well it's because of what we saw last week that through his death Jesus alone offers eternal life he alone offers access to God in him alone is found true worship and therefore of course our response for Jesus determines our destiny on that final day.

just turn back to John 3 verse 36 which we touched on last week where we see that so very clearly don't we whoever believes in the son has eternal life whoever does not obey the son shall not see life but the wrath of God remains on him it's harvest time.

so let me ask the question where would we say where would you say we are at in the history of the world at the moment popular history is quite a thing isn't it on television whether it's David Dimbleby on Sunday evenings showing us how Great Britain was built or I see Andrew Mars about to repeat his history of modern Britain on Friday evenings there's always seems to be at least one of two popular history series on in the evenings but if we were writing the history books what would we say is the defining feature of world history at the moment well I guess we might talk about global uncertainty in the markets or the threat of terrorism you might talk about globalisation or global warning any sorts of things just flicking through this week's Economist focuses on the world of business and sports and the environment and so on but you see

[21:40] Jesus forces us to see what is going on in our world on a much greater scale he says it is harvest time that is the defining feature of our world indeed that has been the defining feature of the last 2,000 years of world history Jesus gathering the harvest world the popular view of God is that

he is sitting in his armchair doing nothing at distance not involved in his world or perhaps of a God who is impotent and unable to be involved in his world know so Jesus it is harvest time and it will be until the end of the world until Jesus returns now imagine for a moment that in the autumn our new prime minister decides to call a snap election I have no authoritative word on this but nonetheless imagine it and so inevitably from that moment everyone is focused on the single issue of campaigning every vote counts so imagine what would happen if one

MP decides to go on holiday perhaps you can imagine the conversation between the chief whip when they phone up and that MP asking what they're doing or another MP who throughout the campaign decides to stay in their London flat and again you can imagine can't be the chief whip phoning up probably being less than polite but reminding the MP that there's an election on that every vote counts that there's an overriding priority that it is election time well in a far greater way Jesus is telling us here that it is harvest time so I want us to ask is this how we see our world in which we live now I guess for many of us the picture that Jesus uses here of an abundant harvest just waiting to be harvested will not necessarily describe our own experience of trying to proclaim the message of Jesus to others neither at home nor at work I guess the temptation perhaps for us if we're in that situation is to think well it may be harvest time but frankly the harvest looks pretty tiny or at least it does in my particular patch but I think if we're tempted to think like that we must trust Jesus in this that it is harvest time that there is a great harvest harvest this is what he is doing in the world this is the work that he is committed to doing I hope therefore we take great encouragement when we do hear of great harvests elsewhere in other parts of the world or perhaps when we hear of big advances for the gospel for the message of Jesus in this country but I think it should encourage us to press on in Jesus work of harvesting where we are and where God has put us I take it it gives us the confidence we need to talk to others about Jesus indeed when the work of harvesting looks like hard work and perhaps when it's very discouraging at times I take it Jesus' words here give that work a great sense of excitement because of course we never know if those we are talking to might indeed be part of the harvest now I'm sure

I'm not the only one who needs this reminder the fact that it's harvest time should govern the way which I think and live concerned in this life in this world that men and women might be in the next world so I think it's just asking ourselves is this the kind of thinking that governs our own thinking and priorities I wonder what it is that does govern our priorities for some it will be getting to the top or getting that promotional pay rise whatever it is for others it will simply be hanging on to the job that we have knowing that every pound counts to pay the bills for others it will be education and actually getting the right education for our children is a thing which shapes and drives all the other decisions that we make in life for others it will be leisure living our life perhaps for weekends or for the next holiday or for the time when we can pursue our dream and move out to the country or retire early whatever it is they're all the things aren't they that people around us in this particular corner of South London set their goals on now some of them may be good things in themselves but obviously when they are the overriding thing when they are the things that control our thinking and the decisions that we make then at that point they do become idols and at that point we need to repent of them because of course if that is the case it shows that we haven't really grasped what Jesus is saying here who Jesus is that he's the saviour of the world and what he's doing in the world that it's harvest time now I think it's very easy to forget this isn't it it's easy for me to forget it the urgent business of simply kind of doing life day to day so easily crowds out the important business of being involved in this harvest so let me say for a Christian here today as I guess most of us are will we make sure that our priorities match up to the priorities of

[27 : 31] Jesus and what he is doing in his world if they don't please will you use the summer to get things back on track we heard from Nick earlier just actually what a good opportunity the summer is to read for example perhaps to read some of those Christian books we've been needing to read over the year but actually it's a great opportunity too to get our own Christian lives back on track if our own priorities do not reflect the priorities of Jesus by repenting of wrong priorities and by refocusing on what Jesus is doing in the world and I hope we can see too that if we're someone here this morning who is not following Jesus it's always great to have one or two like that here on Sunday morning I hope we can see the urgency of investigating the claims of Jesus simply because he is the savior of the world and there is too much at stake not to well let's have a few moments quietly and then

I'm going to pray and then we'll have time for questions and many more believed because of his words heavenly father we thank you for this wonderful truth that the lord jesus christ is indeed the savior of the world that he is not simply some local deity that he did not simply come for a handful of people but to any who will turn to him and thank you too heavenly father for the implications of that for showing us that it's now harvest time and we're sorry when our own priorities do not match up to yours and we pray heavenly father that you would help us to mould and shape our lives around this great truth that it is harvest time that those who reap and those who gather are doing so for that wonderful harvest of eternal life and we ask it for jesus sake amen