

Light Has Come to the Broken

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[0 : 00] I think it will be helpful if you have your Bibles open at John chapter 4, the passage that was read to us as our Gospel for today.

I wonder whether the calendar played any part in the choice of that Gospel. Was it chosen in light of the fact that this is the first Sunday of the new year and that tomorrow is Epiphany, the day that celebrates Jesus' presentation of himself to non-Jews as a picture of what was coming in his mission to the whole world?

When I was told that it had been suggested that I might preach to this title, Life for the Sexually Challenged, I rather doubted whether the calendar had played much part in the choice.

Yet they chose well, as we shall see. We heard the first part of the story. There is a little more to it, and if you have your Bibles open, you'll see that straight away.

Did you find it by any chance hard to believe? I don't find it hard to believe because I think back to something that I witnessed half a century ago.

[1 : 54] But the memory is very vivid, I'll tell you. The Packer family was at a retreat center for a week during which I was going to expound, well, I remember what it was.

It was Ephesians, as a matter of fact. And there was a lady there, handsome lady, very reserved, very solitary.

She, well, if I had thought about it, which frankly I didn't, I would have seen that she was obviously very sad inside.

She was 30-ish. I discovered afterwards that she'd been through four divorces already and was on to her fifth marriage.

Well, it was Texas, after all. But she was a very kind lady, and she helped, actually, with one of our children who needed help.

[3 : 01] We were very grateful. She didn't come to the retreat meetings early in the week. But on the final evening, when folk were invited to testify to anything of significance that had happened to them during the week, one of the leaders brought her up to the microphone and told us that she had something to share with us.

And there she was, laughing and crying at the same time. You don't often see that. And what she had to tell us was that during the week, the Lord Jesus Christ had broken into her life.

The reserve had gone. The sadness had gone. She was pouring it all out. She was transformed. It was hard to believe she was the same person.

Well, in these skeptical days, of course, we ask straight away, did it last? And the answer is, yes, it did last, back at that retreat center some years later.

There she was. And it had certainly lasted and matured. Well, with that experience in mind, I don't find it at all hard to believe the story that we are told in John's Gospel, chapter 4.

[4 : 48] John, writing his Gospel, wants to project the Lord Jesus from a number of standpoints. One of them is Jesus as the transformer of troubled lives.

And this is one of the stories he tells in order to display that. The story of Jesus' encounter with a lady from the Samaritan town of Sychar.

I said a lady. Yes, I know. The Greek word is woman, which can be polite and can be demeaning. According to its context. The English translation woman, though, sounds demeaning from the start. And I don't think that's part of the story at all. So I'm going to call her the lady. Granted, as we shall hear, she was a somewhat shop-soiled lady.

[6 : 01] Remember what Jesus said about her five marriages. And the fact that the man she was living with now wasn't her husband at all.

And I think from the way that the story is told, we should also infer that she was a bit slow on the uptake, at first at least.

Why do I think that? Well, because, as we shall see, she couldn't pick up at all at first what Jesus was talking about.

And she, for sure, was the Apostle John's informant about this conversation. Couldn't have been anyone else. But she had a good memory.

And we have the story told here with wonderful vividness, as it seems to me. And what it shows us is three truths.

[7 : 15] Well, I'm going to survey the whole story, including the part that we didn't read. So it's going to be a survey of, I'm going to present it to you as a survey of four truths about Jesus the Transformer.

I'm going to suggest to you that at the beginning of the new year, focus on Jesus the Transformer is very appropriate to our need.

And, well, we have a good deal of it here. See, first of all, we are shown from the story how conversion commences.

Here is Jesus passing through Samaria. Samaria was a foreign country, really, as far as Jews were concerned.

The Samaritans refused to have anything to do with Jews. The Jews refused to have anything to do with Samaritans. However, here is Jesus resting in the middle of the day at the well, Joseph's well.

[8 : 33] And a lady comes out on her own. She's carrying a water pot. She's come to draw water, as it says.

And Jesus, courteously, I'm sure, although it sounds rather abrupt in the English translation, well, I think it's the woman, this is the way the woman told the story to John.

She didn't make a point of the fact that Jesus was courteous. She simply said, he was there, and he asked me to give him a drink. And her first response to that was an expression of surprise, that he was speaking to her, a Samaritan, at all.

But now, conversion commences, this is the first thing we see. Conversion commences with Jesus intruding.

I use the word intruding. I'm not using it with any implication of rudeness. Simply, that he calls attention to himself, and in that sense, intrudes, and by generating interest in himself, in the person to whom he's talking.

[10 : 00] And that's what you have here. He asked for a drink. By doing that, he aroused the woman's interest in him.

Okay, and so the transforming encounter began. That's how the transforming encounter with the Lord Jesus still begins.

In this modern world, people become interested in Jesus. Jesus, in his providence, so orders things that interest is aroused.

And that leads on to the second thing we see here. How faith is born. Actually born.

Jesus invites, as he invited this lady, to allow him to give her living water.

[11 : 04] At first, she had no idea what he was talking about. The phrase living water, in Greek usage, has as its surface meaning, spring water.

Well water. Water that is bubbling up. As distinct from water that is stagnant. Jesus said, If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, give me a drink, you'd have asked him, and he would have given you living water.

Well, the lady's interest is aroused, and a sense of need is aroused with it. Living water.

Fresh spring water. Oh, if only I could get that whenever I needed it. Which is, of course, daily, at least, in her terms, thinking of literal water.

Jesus invites her to consider him as one who can supply her need. Though she hasn't yet grasped quite what it is.

[12 : 23] You'll note, by the way, in the story that her estimate of Jesus rises steadily as the conversation goes on. In verse 9, he's a Jew.

In verse 11, she's addressing him as Sir, which in Greek, Hebrew, as in English, is respectful. But she goes on from there.

Verse 12, Are you greater than our father Jacob? You would have to be to give us living water. Because even in this well, there's good water, but it isn't living water.

And then the estimate rises again. Verse 19, Sir, I perceive you're a prophet. And finally, verse 29, Can this be the Christ?

Jesus says, I who speak to you am he. And that's going to lead on, actually, in the second half of the story, which we didn't read, to the confession, which was made by a large group of Samaritans from the town.

[13:46] We know that this is indeed the saviour of the world. Verse 42. Yes. And so he is. Well, this is the way in which Jesus allures folk to faith.

I trust we all of us know it. And I trust we all of us are seeking to pass it on. Jesus, the living Lord, risen from the dead, present by the Holy Spirit, invites people to himself because he can meet a need.

of which they can't help being conscious. And, well, the formula still fits.

Thank God it does. And so, in our day, folk come to Christ. That leads to a third thing, how worship becomes real.

people. And here, my phrase, on which the thought hangs, is the phrase, Jesus claims. What does he claim?

[15:02] He claims to lead people into real worship. You've got that in verses 23 and 24. The hour is coming, he tells the lady, who has just started a religious conversation which wouldn't, in itself, if it had been followed up, wouldn't have got her anywhere.

she wanted to discuss the contrast between Samaritans and Jews. But, why is she doing that? Well, it's fairly obviously, it's because she's been hurt by what Jesus has just diagnosed of her marital condition. she's ashamed of it, deep down.

So, she wants to change the subject. So, she wants Jesus to talk to her as a prophet about whether it's right to worship in Samaria, on the mountain of Samaria, or in Jerusalem as the Jews say one should.

Well, Jesus cuts through all that. If you look at verses 23 and 24, you see him saying, the hour is coming, indeed, it's now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth.

[16:33] And you'll notice that spirit has a small s in our translation, and I think that's right. It's spirit in the sense of the heart.

The hour is coming when worship will be given to the Father from the heart as distinct from mere formalities, and it will be given to the Father in truth.

It will be, in other words, a response to truth which has come into the world with Jesus.

so he implies when he says the hour is coming and is now here when this will happen. He says, the Father is seeking such people to worship him.

That's what I'm trying to allure you to. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.

[17:39] and that prompts the lady to say it's a sort of defensive response.

She's backing off a little from these rather breathtaking words of Jesus. I know that Messiah is coming. When he comes, he'll tell us all things.

Jesus responds to that by saying to her, I who speak to you am he. Worship becomes real when we let Jesus lead us to the Father, to worship the Father, which he's able to do because he is the Son of God and has come into the world to introduce people to his Father.

that's one element in the mission of Christ. And when he says, I who speak to you am he, he's identifying himself as the Messiah, the Christ.

And then in the story, there's a fourth thing that we see, namely how the gospel spreads. You know how, I'm sure, how the story continues.

[19:05] the woman leaves her water pot, hurries back to the town, starts telling her neighbors and all the people that she meets in the streets, come see a man who told me all I ever did.

Can this be the Christ? She's putting it as a question, but what she's conveying is that she is confident that he is the Christ.

Would they take it from her? Well, here we have to guess. The natural guess is that the reason why she was at the well at midday on her own in the first place, not early in the morning when water was ordinarily collected from springs and wells for use during the day, was because she was a bit of, how do I say this, a bit of an outcast really, shunned by the rest of the community because perhaps of her marital track record or maybe something else, one doesn't know.

But she's been moved, she's been stirred, scared, she's taking the first steps of faith in her own heart already and she says to everyone that she meets, I think I found the Christ.

And they come out and encounter Jesus and invite him back into Sychar, where he stays for a couple of days, and they say to the woman after those two days, this is verse 42, if you like to look ahead and see, it's no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves and we know, we've had it from the source, that this is indeed the savior of the world.

[21 : 28] So, there, amongst the Samaritans, is the first significant, how can I say it, evangelistic harvest of Jesus' ministry here on earth.

Well, that's the story, and it's the story, as I said, about Jesus the transformer, Jesus who intrudes into people's lives, invites people to him, leads them to the Father in true worship, and so changes their hearts by doing all this, that now they want to share what they've received, and they do, and inhibitions of shyness or unpopularity or whatever, are no longer decisive.

It's a picture of real conversion, in the case of the lady, and of true evangelistic ministry, on the part of the Lord.

Well, now, I'm going to suggest to you that this is a great message for Epiphany, the day, as I said, that celebrates the fact that Jesus came to make himself known, or to be made known, as Savior to all non-Jews, as well as all Jews who would receive him.

Jesus is the focus of life's meaning, and that is a message for everybody. And I suggest further that this is a very suitable ministry for the first Sunday in a new year, our new year.

[23 : 37] Jesus should be the focus of our life's direction. resolution. I don't know whether you make new year resolutions or not, but all of us should resolve, most certainly, whatever else we do or don't commit ourselves to, we should resolve that this year is going to be a year of living for Christ.

May our hearts all unite in that resolution. salvation. And actually, it is a very suitable passage to be meditating on as we come to the Lord's table.

For one of the purposes of the Holy Communion service is to stir up our devotion afresh to the Christ who came to find us and to save us, who died for us, who rose and lives and makes himself present to us as we eat the bread and drink the wine in memory of him.

Christ is the center of the communion service, and this passage, with its demonstration of Jesus the transformer, is surely a portrait presentation of the Savior that fits the communion service perfectly.

So, may the Lord make himself vividly present to us all, and maybe you will feel, as I must confess, I feel, and as the Samaritan lady clearly felt, like the lady in Texas 50 years ago, Christ has come and broken into my life, and thank God he has.

[25 : 47] And as we meditate with that as our central thought, so may God bless us as we come to his table, thank him for the cross, and adore him, risen and glorified as he is, our Savior, our Lord, our life.

Amen.