

HE KNOWS US VERY WELL - ORNCC

Lent 3

15 March 2020

Two people stand aside an ancient well one, the man, is tired and thirsty in the mid-day sun, . The other a woman, carries a water jar, about to draw water for it from the well. The first asks the second for a drink, and she is shocked to the core. For the other is a man, and no man would speak in public to a woman not of his close family. More, this man is a Jew, and she is a Samaritan, and by long and hostile tradition, the two peoples have nothing to do with each other.

After a moment, the woman recovers her voice, asked him how on earth it is that he speaks with her at all. The answer he gives is strange. She does not know it, but he often answers questions so, answering what is in the other's heart, rather than the words upon their lips. He tells her that if she would but ask, the water that would pass between them would be living water, and she or anyone else who drank it would never thirst again. She asks for the water that he says is his to give, so that she might no longer need to come to the well to draw it. The man asks her with whom she would share this gift, that she should call her husband, for in that culture all women of that age would be married. She replies that she has no husband, and it is then he shocks her again

For he knows her. She has had five husbands, and the man with whom she is at present living is no husband to her. And this explains how they met at all. All women in her village came to the well at dawn, when it is cool. But for her, the outcast among the women of her village, that would be to lay herself open to their scorn and contempt. And so she, alone of all of them, comes to draw water in the heat of the day.

Jesus had seen beneath the mask she wore. She knows it and the conversation moves to a different level., To the differences between their peoples, to their hopes, both of them for one will come to liberate them from their oppression, and she is told that the time will come when the differences between their peoples will dissolve and they will be able to worship God whom they both love spirit and in truth . So struck is she by the depth this conversation by the hope that it raises within her that she becomes, she the scorned woman, a missionary to the people of her village. The outcast becomes the agent of change.

Jesus saw beneath her mask, and spoke to the human being beneath it. We all wear masks, to some degree or another. Some of us wear a mask to manipulate others. Many more of us though, wear them for different reasons. Some of us wear them because we are afraid; because life has dealt us too many blows or given us too many disappointments for us to dare to face the world as ourselves alone, and the mask we wear one of self-protection. For others of us, the mask can be a mask of duty where we, for the best of reasons, put aside our own heartfelt preferences for what we believe to be the right thing to do; caring for others, caring for the world. And in truth, all of us in different degrees and proportions, wear all of those masks for some of the time in our lives. Masks are part of the human condition. And unhappily, as well as protecting us they can also imprison us; cutting us off from ourselves, from the wellsprings of our own energy, and from others.

Our God knows this; knows that this wearing of masks is a mark of our species itself; knows that the other self that we place between ourselves and the world can grow almost without our being aware of it. He sees beneath the mask, sees who and what we truly are, and loves us still.

Wonderful enough, but it does not end there. Because now as then beside the well, God wishes not only to see us truly, but to change, wishes to change and free us from all that limit us, and limits the good that we can do in the world. The woman at the well trusted him enough to risk the scorn and contempt of her fellow villagers, running to invite them to see the man who had 'told her all that she ever did'.

If we will but trust him, trust that he means us only good, then change begins. Bit by bit, he will, enable us to see ourselves as we truly are; will with us work progressively to dismantle all that is not true in the face that we show to the world. More, he will give us the life-giving energy and courage - the water he spoke of, to face the world with that true face and even grow so much that our face, our true face, becomes more and more like his, so that people will see it and themselves begin to change. This is the meaning of the parable of the mustard seed. This is the meaning of the yeast the woman mixed with dough. We, our selves changed to the heart, become ourselves the source of change in others

When the disciples returned and found Jesus at the well, revived, they were astonished that he did not need the food that they had brought him. The transformation that he had been able to make in this outcast woman's life, was a source of energy and joy to him. Changing us, in the same way, is, we can believe, is ever so.