

Sermon Sunday 19 March – Sale Cathedral
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Are you ever afraid people will find out who you really are?

or

Do you long for people to know the real you?

Perhaps both.

Timothy Keller says:

“To be loved but not known is comforting but superficial. To be known and not loved is our greatest fear.”

From about aged 10 I have had obsessive compulsive disorder. I certainly didn't know what it was then. I just thought I was broken, a horrible person, that no one would love me if they knew, and perhaps no one really liked me anyway. I certainly didn't love myself.

I was plagued by this until I was around 24. The agony of living, what felt like, a double life. I would live vivaciously out there, and then close my bedroom door and let the tears flow.

When I met Samuel, my now husband, we'd been dating for a bit under a year, and I was terrified that if he really knew about who I was he wouldn't want to be with me. I worked up the courage to tell him about my OCD. He immediately consoled me, told me it was ok, and went to borrow a book on the disorder, so he could know what I was going through as best he could. We also went to the Doctor where I finally disclosed everything to her, and she wasn't phased, she just started a treatment plan.

The process of becoming known, was the beginning of my healing. I started telling all my friends and family. It was liberating.

I thirsted to be known and truly loved. The longing is two-fold, it is not only to be known, but also to be loved.

You see, the woman in today's gospel was known. She was known to be a Samaritan, a race with whom Jews did not mix, and a woman of any ethnicity wasn't to be given much sway, especially a Samaritan woman. She had her fair share of brokenness and grief. She was a known outsider.

The woman was at Jacob's well, the place of encounter in the bible. Jesus comes and asks her for water. This is highly significant. Jews did not share things in common with Samaritans, let alone to engage a Samaritan woman! Jesus goes on and we realise that Jesus knows all about this woman, he knows her and loves her, he speaks to her of the living water, the water that allows all that we fear to be transformed by love. In Jesus, “[The woman] finds one who is not intimidated by the natural barriers of race and gender but addresses her as a human being” (Gaventa, Texts For Preaching, Year A).

The woman in today's gospel is accepted by Jesus, liberated from the societal boxes in which she had been imprisoned.

We'd like to think that our societies have progressed, that women are liberated from the status of "less than men". Sure in some ways we have achieved equality and yet in other ways we have an enormous way to go. There is still a disparity in wages, worldwide 1 in 3 women experience sexual or physical violence, women are often still objectified rather than truly known – we just need to look at the media to see this... the list continues.

It is not only women who have knowledge assumed about them, or categories assigned to them. We use labels/boxes for many people, and treat those people according to their box: "disabled", "mentally ill", "LGBTIQ", "gay", "young", "old", "refugee"... the list goes on. These labels come with assumed knowledge and this knowledge can exclude and hurt. We need only to listen to Trump to hear about the walls that are built between people, both literal and metaphorical walls. How far we have travelled from our common humanity.

So what does all of this have to do with mission?
(what doesn't it?)

Simply put, mission is about knowing and loving. Not so simply lived out. Mission is about relationship, getting to know who people are beyond their label or box. I am not just speaking about any kind of relationship, nor a cliché, small talk kind of relationship. I mean choosing to really get to know each other, sharing one another's vulnerability, experiencing the joy and pain of another... having compassion, literally eating bread together, recognising our shared humanity, and how rich our humanity could be with our neighbour.

If this is what mission is about, it starts right here. It starts in our families, in our church, in the bakery, supermarket and hairdresser. It continues on from here into our nation, and beyond, in an attempt of recognising the God-given dignity in each person. Of gathering at the modern-day wells and crossing barriers, of asking questions, getting to know beyond the boxes.

If this is our attitude to mission we will realise that it is reciprocal. At ABM, whilst we partner with the church in Vanuatu to build wells because drinking water is becoming salinised due to rising sea levels and climate change, we realise that we receive from the communities of Vanuatu great hospitality and lessons in acceptance and joy. The same goes for all of the communities with which ABM is in partnership, as we work together for education, equality, poverty reduction and human flourishing. It is impossible to be involved in God's mission in a one-way direction, it is about reciprocity and relationship, giving and receiving, it is a relationship. We cannot know about a friend's suffering and do nothing.

In today's gospel passage we are shown that Jesus crosses boundaries to show God's love. We are shown the deep love and acceptance of God. We are shown that God knows us even more than we know ourselves, and still loves us. As we grow to accept this we also get to know ourselves more, and

we learn more and more just how inextricably linked we are to others. With this knowledge we can no longer choose to ignore some people based on external boxes like race, sexuality, gender, ability, or age. Because we realise humanity is so much bigger than these boxes, indeed their aren't enough boxes to contain all of the uniqueness.

“The sweeping, inclusive character of Jesus’ mission is a note that needs sounding again and again today. Rebuilding walls seems so much easier than tearing them down (Gaventa, Texts For Preaching, Year A)”. Let us demolish the walls that divide our common humanity, and accept the living water that Jesus offers. The water that quenches the agonising thirst to be known, and washes the utter fear of being unknown or known and not loved.