

Sharing a Chance Encounter with Jesus

Romans 5:1-11

John 4:5-42

Purpose: To highlight the role of human receptiveness of the miracle of faith so that those present identify their role in an active engagement / commitment.

Last Sunday I spoke to you about the miracle of faith. I was trying to say that the act of believing in God is not an act of our making. And, although I am not a Greek scholar, as I spoke about that close encounter between Jesus and Nicodemus, I introduced you to that Greek word *anōthen* – the word that gets used in Matthew’s gospel to describe the ripping of the veil in the temple from top to bottom at the moment Jesus dies on the cross.

In his encounter with Nicodemus, Jesus links that word with the dynamic images of wind and spirit to demonstrate that we have about as much control over our spiritual rebirth as children of God as we have over our biological birth. “The wind blows where it wants to,” Jesus tells him. “The birth from above is like that.”

I don’t know about you, but when I hear Jesus speak of the birth from above in these terms, it seems that

miracle of faith implies a deep renewal of life. Catching a glimpse into the kingdom of God, which after all is what Jesus and Nicodemus have been yarning about, has something fundamentally transformative. We have that expression “my life was suddenly turned upside down”. Being born *anowen* is like that.

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That’s certainly seems to be what is going on for the Samaritan woman in the gospel story for today. She is utterly transformed by this close encounter with Jesus. This water gatherer woman seems pretty much in tune with her world as she comes to collect her water from the well. She understands that a Jew wouldn’t normally be seen dead chatting with her and has a sense of the expected messiah. But it’s salvation at a distance. It’s hardly the number one item on her agenda.

But everything changes when Jesus tells her that he is that chosen one. He IS the Messiah. Still uncertain about what’s going on in her life, she has been nevertheless been captivated by this close encounter with Jesus. Something transformative has happened. She can’t keep it to herself.

“Can this really be the Messiah?” It’s still a question, but asked so deliberately and publicly that her friends and

neighbours leave their daily business to take a look for themselves. And at the end of the story, many Samaritans believe because of her story.

It's an *another* story. The miracle of faith is at work. The wind of the spirit has been blowing in unexpected territory. Something deeply transformative has happened to a person and in her township. It's not what you expect when a woman returns from the well. Their lives have been turned upside in this chance encounter with Jesus.

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Notice the human side of this close encounter with Jesus. I'm not thinking first and foremost of the very humane and engaging manner which Jesus brings to the encounter. That's fertile territory for exploration and I'm sure you've done that on other occasions. This is a missionary passage and it's worth exploring how Jesus acts as missionary in this story.

But not today! Instead, I want to think about what the Samaritan woman brings to their meeting.

The trouble is when some folk hear me say that we can't manufacture faith for ourselves, which is what I said last week, they interpret that to mean that the human

side is unimportant. “If faith is miraculous,” they reason, “what we humans bring into our encounter with Jesus doesn’t matter.” You could be Mr or Ms Blobby with the spinelessness of a marshmallow or a baked custard and still receive this miracle.

Since I can’t make faith for myself what I do doesn’t matter! Well that kind of understanding does not sit comfortably with the story of the Samaritan woman.

I think I’ve already told you something very important about what the woman brings to her chance, close encounter with Jesus. She is getting on with the business of living. Water gathering is part and parcel business of living. Her close encounter with Jesus does not come to one who is apathetic and indifferent. She knows how she fits into her world and whatever people think of her moral disposition because of the multiple men in her life, she gets on with the business of living.

She may not be the maker of the miracle in her encounter with Jesus, but she is anything but passive as it unfolds around her. She is full of questions. That’s actually something that doesn’t change in her transformation. Why is a Jew talking to me? Where do you get this living water? Are you more important than Jacob our ancestor? Could this be the messiah? The

miracle of faith takes shape in her as she engages with Jesus with an open mind and asks her questions.

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That's the second thing I think that's important in this story. She is fully engaged in life and the possibility of new relationships. That was the first thing I think is worth noticing about the Samaritan woman. The second thing is that she has an open mind. She is not closed to the possibility that opens before her.

I have to say, I am quietly intrigued by the resurgence of activist atheism in recent times. I'm thinking of folk like the late Christopher Hitchens and Richard Dawkins.

And I need to confess. When I hear them talk about the God they don't believe in, I have to say, "I don't think I believe in that kind of God either." When they talk about the God they don't believe in, it seems to me that they often describe a callous dictator who backs up his moral bigotry with revenge and payback. I'm not sure that I believe in a God like that.

I believe in a God who is love, who seeks to captivate the world with love and beauty. I believe in a God who infiltrates the deepest places of human misery and despair and beavers away in the background

anonymously and often forgotten against great adversity to make things better. That's the divine work of a creator. I don't believe in a God who is the ultimate bully. I believe in a God who seeks to be intimately and creatively engaged with people in the struggle to make hope transparent and the divine community of justice and peace a concrete reality.

So I want to say to those activist atheists – and I was one of them myself once – are you open to other options? The Samaritan woman is fully engaged with life and open to the possibility.

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There is a third thing that I want to notice about this Samaritan woman. She is such a significant woman I wish we could call her by name. Alas that's an impossibility.

But notice – and I have alluded to it already – that she doesn't allow her lingering doubts and creatures of the prevailing powers become an obstacle to letting others see into the transformative power of her experience.

It is almost too good to be true. Can he be the messiah really? Really, truly? So while the disciples are choking on the cultural bigotry that Jesus has just pushed to one

side and critique Jesus for talking to her, she sets off back to the city unable to contain herself.

What an amazing woman! What an amazing thing to witness the miracle of faith become part of her life. What an amazing thing to see its transformative power in her community.

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She's not Mrs Blobby is she? She is engaged, open to new possibilities, not put off by the patronising attitude of Jesus disciples. And those last lingering is-it-all-too-good-to-be-true doubts aren't enough to stop her moving forward. She steps out and the transformative power of the gospel steps out with her.

The miracle of faith may be confront our do-it-yourself pull yourself up by the bootstraps disposition. Faith is miraculous! But there is nothing passive about a close encounter with Jesus. Miraculous faith invites us to engage with it. Miraculous faith reveals itself in ordinary human lives which are transformed as engaged, open, risk-takers become active, committed disciples in relationship with Jesus.