



Pause to pray - week 5 - 8th May

'Sir,' the woman said, 'I can see that you are a prophet. Our ancestors worshipped on this mountain, but you Jews claim that the place where we must worship is in Jerusalem.' [John 4:19-20]

The Samaritan woman was not disinterested in religion, but much of her experience of those who called themselves the people of God, was of the divisions and disputes that defined and separated them. The people of Samaria could lay claim to some of the great historic sites of our salvation story, but the Jews occupied the Jerusalem Temple, which they maintained was the only place that God could be truly worshipped. As argument and division continued, we might not be surprised if it generated a fair degree of cynicism and negativity in its wake.

As we have already reflected, there is good reason to imagine that this particular woman felt shunned by all people of religion - her failed relationships and current circumstances would hardly have attracted their approval. At a time of loss and loneliness, she was more likely to receive condemnation and rejection than anything else. What bitterness and indifference might this have generated? Religion could easily be seen as nothing more than the means of perpetuating longstanding disputes and moral indignations, rather than being the means of her support and comfort in life's crises.

In reality, while we recognise these possibilities, we have no idea whether it was true to this woman's experience. But we do know that many people in our own spheres of influence, for various reasons, feel negatively disposed towards matters of faith and religious belief. Perhaps they have had their own moments of rejection; maybe they feel angry with God because of the life circumstances that have come their way; perhaps they do not fully understand what they perceive as the hypocrisies of organised religion - but either way, their starting point is one of negativity and even bitterness towards our Gospel story.

What might we do to help create a different impression? Do we have the grace to absorb those negativities and reach out to overcome them? What might lie behind some of the apparent cynicism that we will encounter, and how, like Jesus, can we help people see beyond our earthly failings to the Spirit and Truth that undergirds our faith? Even in the midst of negativity, what opportunities might exist for people to encounter the love, hope and acceptance that Jesus offers?

**God of Spirit and truth,
Forgive us for when the images of faith that we offer to our world,
Reflect our own shortcomings rather than the possibilities of your Gospel.
We pray today for those whose experiences and circumstances
Have left them feeling angry, cynical and even bitter towards you,
And the Good News that we are called to share.
Help us to communicate a different story;
May we not be indifferent to pain that many bear;
Grant us the grace to listen,
And the wisdom and faith to make possible
Fresh encounters of love, hope and acceptance.
Through Jesus our Saviour and friend**

AMEN