

14 March 2020

From Outside In (John 4: 5-42)

© Sarah Bachelard

What's involved in the journey of redemption? How we might expect that journey to change us? So far in this series of Lenten reflections, I've suggested that according to our tradition the redemptive journey involves both something we must do *and* something only God can do for us. With the story of Jesus' testing in the wilderness, we learned that for our part, we must give up the temptation to run our lives apart from God; we must let go defensive, ego-ic, self-securing habits of being. And then, from last week's account of Jesus' dialogue with Nicodemus, we learned that we must dispose ourselves to receive what God is giving. We must 'be born from above', allowing God's Spirit to vitalise and infuse ours.

These two movements, of letting go and receiving, represent the fundamental dynamic of Christian life. It's what 'redemption' is. We die to the self-centred self with all its neuroses, selfishness and isolation, and we open ourselves to receive a new way of being, life sourced from beyond self-concern – generous, joyous and free. And now in today's reading, it's as if John's gospel begins to explore how this redemption, this new life, unfolds. In particular, what it means for our experience of God and our relationship with other people.

Let's recap John's setting of the scene. In the narrative, Jesus is on his way home – he's been in Jerusalem and the countryside surrounding the city. But he's heard that the authorities have been alerted to the growing popularity of his movement and message (John 4: 1). So, writes John, Jesus 'left Judea and started back to Galilee. But he had to go through Samaria'. The journey takes him necessarily by way of foreign territory. And while he is on the way, tired from walking, he stops to sit by the well of Jacob near the Samaritan city of Sychar. It is about noon. A Samaritan woman comes to draw water, and so begins the longest conversation that Jesus has with anyone in the gospels.

In Jewish Scripture, there's always something significant about a man encountering a woman at a well. It's a key feature of what Old Testament scholars call 'the betrothal type scene'. According to the conventions of this 'scene', the future bridegroom journeys to a foreign land, signifying his emergence from his immediate family circle. There he encounters a girl or girls at a well in the desert. Someone, normally the man but not always, draws water from the well which establishes a bond between them and then the girl or girls rush home to bring news of the stranger's arrival. Finally, there is the betrothal, in most cases accompanied by an invitation to a meal and the sharing of hospitality.¹

Do you notice the parallels? The well at which Jesus and the Samaritan woman meet is said to have been given by the patriarch Jacob, who himself had met his wife Rachel at a well, and whose parents, Isaac and Rebekah had also met, wait for it, at a well in the desert. A further layer in all this, is that the Hebrew scriptures often portray God's passionate love for God's people in spousal metaphors. They image the consummation of God's relationship with Israel as a wedding feast. John's account of the wedding at Cana has already drawn on this imagery. It puts Jesus in the role of Israel's true bridegroom as he provides what a bridegroom should – the wine for the wedding. In this story too, in the use of the betrothal type-scene, it seems there's another unveiling of Jesus as bridegroom.

But in this rich narrative, there's also a profound subversion of Israel's expectations. In the traditional betrothal type-scene, the girl encountered by the stranger is, well, a *girl*. She's unmarried, available. Here, the Samaritan woman has already been married five times, and is now in a relationship with someone who is not her husband. What's this about? There are those who wish at this point passionately to defend the woman's honour and moral probity – maybe all her previous husbands died, maybe she was divorced against her will, maybe she was not permitted to marry under Roman law, and so cannot be considered an adulteress or as living in 'sin' because of her present unmarried state. However, she's ended up

¹ Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (Basic Books, 1981), 51ff.

in her situation, so this interpretation goes, we can't just assume she's a 'fallen' woman. Well, maybe so – but I must say, I'm not entirely convinced – and the reason I'm not convinced is that the weight of John's theological argument is stronger if she *is* understood to have been in some sense 'unfaithful', as the text implies.

Remember I said just now, that the Hebrew scriptures portray God's love for God's people in spousal metaphors. From a Jewish point of view, Samaritans had strayed from faithfulness to the one true God. They episodically worshipped other gods. New Testament scholar Sandra Schneiders suggests that the woman at the well therefore metaphorically represents Samaria. Her implied unfaithfulness stands for the state of Samaria as a whole – involved with multiple 'husbands', none of whom are capable of reliably offering the means of life. The import of this woman's 'betrothal' encounter with Jesus is thus that it makes *him*, 'metaphorically speaking', her seventh husband – and the number seven, in Scripture, is the number signifying completion, wholeness, true consummation.

And this is what's so profoundly subversive about this story. The text is at pains to emphasise the impurity in Jewish eyes of Samaritans. In the usual betrothal type scene, the bridegroom travels to a foreign land, it's true, and there seems to be little issue with finding a bride there. By Jesus' day, however, Jews and Samaritans 'do not share things in common'. Yet this fact, and the sense Jewish readers would have had of this woman's double 'impurity' (her foreignness and dubious moral status) makes no difference at all to Jesus. She is known by him ('he told me everything I've ever done'), she is symbolically betrothed to him, and her proclamation of Jesus' arrival to her home town has the effect of inviting all of them to the wedding feast, into relationship with the one true God, whom they now recognize as *their* God, the 'Saviour of the world'. What a story!

And it brings us back to the question of the redemptive journey, and how we might expect it to change us. On the vision John offers us here, it seems we're to understand that to be drawn into Jesus' relationship with the Father, to share his way of being, will change both our relationships with one another and our relationship with God.

In the eyes of Jesus, those who've been seen as 'outsiders' are 'insiders' after all. Those thought to be excluded from the possibility of divine favour by reason of moral or religious impurity turn out to be equally invited to intimacy with the divine life. God is revealed as having nothing to do with the tribal identities human groups construct and maintain, and which license disregard and maltreatment. In Christ, all such boundaries are transgressed and rendered void.

As for our relationship with God – well that too shifts from the outside in. Three times in this discourse, Jesus insists on the movement from an externally mediated relationship with God, to one that comes alive within us. He speaks of wanting to give the woman at the well 'living water' that would quench her thirst forever, and release her from the need to keep returning to draw water. And I wonder if he's referring here to the overcoming of repetitive, religious ritual that fails to satisfy, through the gift of an abiding relationship with God, 'a spring of water' 'gushing up from within to eternal life'?

Then, in a segment on worship, he insists that far from God being worshipped solely in a particular, tribally connected place, whether on 'this mountain or in Jerusalem', true worship can be potentially everywhere, in everyone. God is Spirit, he says, and 'the time is coming, and is now here, when true worshippers will worship in Spirit and in truth'. And finally, when the disciples return and offer him the food they've brought him, Jesus again insists that his nourishment comes ultimately not from the outside but from the abiding of God within: 'I have food to eat that you do not know about'.

This movement of our relationship with God, from external to internal, doesn't mean it's all subjective – a matter of inward feeling and what we happen to think. God is Other – Jesus says, 'I am he who is talking to you'. But John wants us to know that the redemptive journey is one of deepening intimacy with God and with every other; we're invited to know God's life nourishing ours from within, from the inside. And we're called to recognize one another as potential sharers in a banquet that has no end, the wedding feast at which we are joined with Christ himself, the very love of God consummated in and through us for the salvation of the world.