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In Time (John 4. 5-42)

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The great 20th century philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein once said that philosophers should greet each other with the words, 'Take your time'. It's advice that resonates deeply with the text of John's gospel where a sense of time, and the time things take, is pervasive. John is the evangelist who speaks again and again of whether and when Jesus' 'hour has come', and I love the way that in the reading we just heard, the action is deliberately situated not only in place (at Jacob's well, in the Samaritan city of Sychar) but in time (it was about noon). The dialogue between Jesus and the Samaritan woman takes what seems to be a long time, a duration that allows for the progressive deepening of the woman's perception of him, a deep and subtle shift in register. And all this seems to be communicating something about what's actually involved in coming to recognise truth so as to be changed by it. So let's take a little time ourselves to ponder what's here.

The action gets underway when Jesus asks the woman for a drink of water. She's puzzled, given that 'Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans', but immediately Jesus responds by upping the metaphorical ante: 'If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, "Give me a drink", you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water'. The woman is stuck at the level of the literal, worrying about buckets and such, though with the irony for which John's gospel is famous, she identifies the truth of Jesus without realising it: 'Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well?' ('hell yeah', we hear, *sotto voce* from the text). Jesus goes on to spell out the difference between the water from the well that quenches thirst only temporarily and his gift of water that quenches thirst eternally. The woman, though, still essentially uncomprehending, still not recognising either her real need or what's being offered, says 'I'll have some

of that', so that I may not 'have to keep coming here to draw water'. And that's the end of scene 1.

Scene 2 begins with an abrupt non-sequitur – Jesus outing her marital status.¹ And it's at this point she starts to glimpse that something more might be going on. 'Sir, I see that you are a prophet'. But that's a challenging acknowledgement, difficult to reconcile with her existing understanding of God. 'Our ancestors worshipped on this mountain, but you say the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem'. How do I make sense of this? Jesus doesn't want to get caught here. Whether worship happens on the mountain or in Jerusalem is not essentially the issue, he says – indeed 'the hour is coming and is now here' (note the time again) when true worshippers will worship the Father in Spirit and in truth. The woman again senses something more. She's already identified him as a prophet, but now she mentions the Messiah – God's long promised one. She doesn't call him that, but it's as if she's testing out the inkling. 'I know that Messiah is coming ... and *when* he comes he will proclaim all things to us'. And now it's as if her listening has been sufficiently prepared, and the time is ripe for revelation. 'I am he' says Jesus, 'I am', 'the one who is speaking to you'.

Scene 3. 'Just then', at this moment of dramatic crisis, Jesus' disciples return. They're astonished to find him speaking with a foreign woman, but don't say anything. She leaves her water jar and heads back to the city to share her astounded sense of having encountered something revolutionary: 'Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?' Meanwhile, back at the well, the disciples are urging Jesus to eat the food they've brought. But he says to them, 'I have food to eat of which you know not'. This seems to me an almost comical recapitulation of scene 1. Different humans, same dynamic. Where Jesus and the woman had got at cross-purposes over whether they were speaking of literal or metaphorical water, so now the disciples say to one another,

¹ For more on the significance of this, see <https://benedictus.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/From-Outside-In-140320.pdf>

“Surely no-one has brought him something to eat?”. Once again, Jesus must shift the register in which they engage him: ‘My food is to do the will of him who sent me’.

Well, the symbolic range of this story is incredible and much more could be drawn out. Today I’ve been focusing particularly on what it suggests about the human *process* of coming to apprehend the fuller truth of things. In the first instance, I think, this story teaches that, of necessity, we all start where we are – with the conceptual apparatus, the cultural conditioning and personal circumstances we bring. But in any authentic encounter with God, we will soon find ourselves being stretched – invited to tune in to subtler dimensions of language, feeling and thought. Sometimes I’ve had the experience of people wanting me to justify my faith or the way I speak of God as if I could give a two sentence summary that would satisfy, and without there being any awareness that the level at which the question is asked may be getting in the way of the response I’d like to give. As if, like Jesus and the woman at the well, we’re talking in different registers. And I know I’ve displayed that same obtuseness at times in my own inquiries, my own search.

But the truth is that growing in apprehension of the fullness of things necessarily involves expanding our capacity to perceive and receive. Jesus in John’s gospel makes this explicit. In a later discourse preparing his disciples for his death, he tells them ‘I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now’ (16. 12). In the spiritual life, we grow into things; we simply cannot know or be transformed by God all at once. It takes time – represented in our story by the woman’s gradually deepening recognition and response, and her willingness to explore what she thinks she’s discovering as she brings it into conversation with her community.

In our culture, however, ‘taking our time’ is an increasingly threatened art. We’ve become used to instant access to information and immediate gratification of our wants and curiosity. Speed of communication has become an end in itself and there’s impatience with the rhythms of creaturely life, such that the organisation of work and family can seem explicitly configured so as to deprive us of time to reflect,

rest, grieve, play, learn and grow.² And of course one consequence of this inhuman pace and demand is the stretching of ecological resources to their limit, generating the climate emergency we're now in, giving us (almost ironically) a sense that we really are running out of time to avert disaster.

'Take your time' was Wittgenstein's counsel, and I've been suggesting this is intrinsic to the process of spiritual growth. But what could it mean to do this in the face of the urgent needs of our world, the deadlines that loom over us, the family and personal emergencies that befall us, when we have no time to waste?

I wonder if the notion of different registers is helpful here. There *are* things we need to do, things that require immediate action, quick decision. This is the nature of life in a world of contingency and limit. But I think what Jesus is trying to make visible is that undergirding this time-bound, even time-poor world, is something that is not limited, not contingent – something limitless and eternal. This reality, this resource may be tapped into. It may even become in us a spring of water gushing up to eternal life, so that in us, eternity enters into and redeems time.

And my experience is that when this happens, when I do manage to tap in, time is expanded from the inside. Things start to unfold in the right time – sometimes more slowly than I'd like, but at other times with surprising suddenness and ease. This suggests that taking our time, in the sense of allowing ourselves time to tune in to the deeper currents, is not about delaying necessary action; it's more about allowing the non-anxious ever presence of God to surface through our agitation to make available a different quality of being, a truer responsiveness to the world. And in the end, isn't this the only real possibility for our healing? Isn't this, ultimately, what it means to encounter the Saviour of the world'?

² See Rowan Williams, 'Climate crisis: fashioning a Christian response' in *Faith in the Public Square* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012), pp.196-207, p.200.