

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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Studies in John's Gospel: True Worship and the Second Sign - John 4

Many, many years ago when I was a teenager I remember going to a Covenanter camp at West Mersea and during the time that I was there one of the camp leaders, at an assembly of the campers gave an address and called it the story of the S-W's. He then turned to John 4 and gave his message from that chapter and he pointed out that in it we read of quite a number of S-W's. For instance we have

- Sychar's Well,
- the Saviour of the World,
- a Samaritan Woman,
- Satisfying Water, and
- Spiritual Worship.

It is strange how many things that appear to be very insignificant, things that happened so many years ago, we can remember quite easily whilst much more important events of a much more recent time we completely forget. Thinking over what we have before us this morning I remembered again this story of the S-W's for this is to be the main subject of our meditation.

Sychar's Well

It begins by telling us that Jesus left Judea in order to make a journey to Galilee but specifically mentions that he must needs go through Samaria. It may well be that Samaria lay on the direct route from Jerusalem to Galilee but I am convinced that this was not the chief reason that He went that way. There was a much more urgent reason why He needed to take that route and it was because He knew of a soul that He would meet in the vicinity of the city of Sychar which was in that part of the country known as Samaria. The city of Samaria at the time of the Lord had been the capital of the Northern Kingdom at the time when Hezekiah was King of Judah. In those days Sennacherib the King of Assyria besieged and captured it and its people were carried away into captivity. Together with other cities of the province it was repopulated by people from the east and the resultant population was the Samaritans of whom we read in the New Testament. As can be imagined, religiously they were a mixed race and it is recorded of them that they feared the Lord but at the same time served their graven images. When Ezra returned to the land to rebuild the temple these people came to him and offered to help but he refused their proffered aid with the words "Ye have nothing to do with us to build a house unto our God". Ezra 4:3.

Now our Lord Jesus has reached Sychar and in verse 6 we are told that He was weary and He takes a seat by a well which was famous because it was a well that Jacob had given to the people. I think that this is a very touching verse. Here we have the Son of God now in the form of man with all the needs of a man and here he is tired and needing a drink. The wells of Scripture form a very interesting study for it would seem that the meaning or Scriptural purpose of each one is displayed in the One we find sitting beside the well of Sychar. For instance in Genesis 16 we find Hagar seated beside a well called Beer-lahai-roi which means "the God who reveals Himself". Then in Numbers 21:17 we find a well personified and becoming the object of praise. In Proverbs 5:15 we read "drink waters out of thine own system, and running waters out of thine own well". Here the well becomes our own and we are blessed by it. There are other examples to which we could allude but I leave my hearers to examine them for themselves. I merely say that the wells and what they mean or represent are displayed in the person of the One here seated by Jacob's well.

Samaritan Woman

As the Lord waits the one whom He had come specifically to meet arrives at the well to draw water, a poor Samaritan woman, and we learn from the subsequent conversation that she was not one whose life was to be commended. Presumably that was why she had come to the well in the heat of the day, not willing to fraternise with others who may have been there. The Lord engages this despised Samaritan woman in conversation and in doing so gives a demonstration of personal evangelism. His first words are a simple request, "Give me to drink". Just think of that - here is the creator of the oceans of the world asking for a drink of water from a Samaritan woman. She, for her part, expresses astonishment for she realises that this one who asks is a Jew and moreover no ordinary Jew, for she well knew that the Jews have no dealings with the Samaritans. Her reply demonstrating her astonishment brings forth from

the Lord words that she surely must have had great difficulty in understanding. He speaks of a giving God, he speaks of Himself as the one who could give living water and implies that if she would but ask then such water would be given her. Then the Lord adds that whoever drank of this living water would never thirst again and that it would be a well of water within the recipient that would spring up into everlasting life. She might not have understood what the Lord was saying but whatever it was He was offering she decided that she wanted it and so her request is, "Sir, give me this water that I thirst not, neither come hither to draw". She has a sense that this stranger is no ordinary Jew; indeed He is no ordinary man. Her words imply that He was greater than their father Jacob who had himself drunk of the well.

May I give a brief summary of this part of the Lord's conversation with this woman? Firstly, the Lord speaks of a giving God - "If thou knewest the gift of God". Are we fully appreciative that our God is a giving God? Secondly, the Lord declares His own person and this is of great importance, for the One who was speaking to her was the dispenser of God's gift. In short, He was Himself God. Thirdly, His reference to living water was no doubt a strange expression to her but so were His words to Nicodemus. He had spoken of "being born again" and such an expression was initially unintelligible. So it was with the woman. She was a Samaritan and the Samaritans only acknowledged the Pentateuch, but she may have had some understanding of the remainder of the Old Testament in which case she would have read Jeremiah 2:13: "And my people have committed two evils; they have forsaken me, the fountain of living waters": also Jeremiah 17:13: "They have forsaken the Lord, the fountain of living waters".

Satisfying Water

We who have the four gospels at our disposal and indeed all the rest of the New Testament can readily understand what the Lord meant when He speaks of living water, and how the living water of verse 10 becomes a well of water in verse 14. To Nicodemus the Lord had said, "Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit he cannot enter the Kingdom of God." Further, the Lord says in John 7:37, "If any man thirst, let him come unto me and drink. He that believes on me as the Scripture hath said 'out of his innermost being shall flow rivers of living water.'" Then follows the comment '(but this He spoke of the Spirit whom they that believe on Him should receive)'. Water in Scripture is often used as a figure of the Word of God and hence what the Lord is saying to this woman is that His word is first of all life-giving to the one who will receive it and it then portrays the gift of the Holy Spirit that would be given later after the Lord's resurrection from among the dead. The indwelling Spirit springs up in the believer to the source of life, Christ in glory.

Before the Lord can go any further with the woman, before He can reach her heart and make her truly understand the significance of the living water, He first of all has to reach her conscience. We read that grace and truth came by Jesus Christ. This woman had already experienced the Lord's grace; now she has to be confronted by the truth. This is the first arrow of the gospel preacher; he has to bring the realisation of sin and what it is to the one whom he is addressing. To make men realise the reality of sin, how it separates men from God, how God must judge the sinner who must realise his condition; that he must stand in the presence of God and know that he is nothing, he has nothing to offer and he is completely reliant upon the grace of God for his salvation. Such is the evangelist's greatest difficulty. To the vast majority sin is murder, armed robbery, violence and similar outrages but the few peccadilloes of which most of us are guilty, a lie, disobedience, pilfering and the like are minor infringements of the code of society and God will take no notice of them. It is not so and this woman had to realise what she was, and so the Lord calls upon her to call her husband. Here the Lord touches her conscience and moreover, in a particularly vulnerable area, for she was a woman who had transgressed the marital code on more than one occasion. She is indeed standing even now in the presence of God. The Lord's request adds further to her assessment of Him. She had recognised him as a Jew in verse 9, as a great man in verse 12, now she says "I perceive that thou art a prophet". She does not immediately respond to the Lord's request but appears to turn the conversation to another matter. She distinguishes between the place of worship of the Samaritans and that of the Jews. The Samaritans worshipped 'in this mountain' that is Mount Gerizim, but the Jews worshipped at Jerusalem. Then follows four verses namely verses 21-24 that have always amazed me, for they make up the most transparent passage on worship that we find in all the New Testament, and moreover they are addressed to a gentile woman outside the Jewish company. Her change of subject might not be so incongruous as one might think. You will remember the story of Naaman in 2 Kings 5. After he had been healed from his leprosy he was convicted to the truth of Elisha's God. It was his duty to attend upon the King when he went into the house of his god, Rimmon, and he requested of Elisha two mules' burden of earth since henceforth he would not worship on the unclean land of Syria. After his conviction Naaman's thoughts immediately turned to worship and so it may have been with this woman.

Spiritual Worship

In this short passage our Lord reveals something about worship that is not fully comprehended today. Worship is to be addressed to the Father which was not so with either Samaritan or Judaistic worship. Such was Gerizim and Jerusalem. Gerizim was largely spurious, an imitation of Israel. Jerusalem with its temple was now disowned by God. But in verse 23 the Lord intimates that the hour was to come, indeed it was already present, when true worship would be addressed to the Father and would not depend on any specific location. The fact that it was to be addressed to the

Father necessitates a break with the world. In the New Testament the Father and the world are antagonistic to one another. For example, in 1 John 2:15-16 we read "Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him". It is therefore clear that those of the world have no place when it comes to the worship of the Father and yet we see outside many churches and chapels the invitation to all "Come and worship with us". The concept of worship to the Father is little entered into.

It might be helpful to ask the question, "What is worship?" In the first place we must realise whom we worship. God the Father is the eternal self-existing One. Worship to Him is thanksgiving and praise... Praise for what we know of Him, by His word and through His Spirit. His majesty, holiness, truth, goodness, mercy, love for us and delight in us - what God has done in Christ As another has said, worship "is the honour and adoration which are rendered to God by reason of what He is in Himself and what He has done for those who render it." Gospel preaching is not worship, although it might well lead to such if it leads to the conversion of a convicted soul. A sermon is not worship, although it might be given by a faithful minister of the Lord and wholly based upon His word, and consequently be of great help to those who listen. Prayer is not worship. Generally speaking, prayer is making requests of God but worship is giving something to God. The Lord said "The Father seeketh such to worship Him." What a wonder that the redeemed soul can give something to God and, moreover, something that God appreciates. Then the Lord adds "True worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth". God is a spirit and worship to Him must be according to his true nature. We have received the Holy Spirit of God and been made partakers of His divine nature and in the power of such a communion the true believer worships the Father. But it is also "in truth", that is, according to the divine revelation that the Father has given of Himself.

The Saviour of the World

The work in the soul of this Samaritan woman is complete. She recognises that Jesus is the Christ. And John at the end of his Gospel writes "These are written that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye might have life through His name". The woman leaves, leaving her water pot behind, and the disciples return. They bid Him eat of the food that they had brought but the Lord responds, saying "I have meat to eat that ye know not of". His meat was doing the Father's will; His silent satisfaction was in the repentance of a sinner. The woman returns to Samaria and proclaims to all around that she has found "the Christ". The Samaritans believed in a coming Messiah and those who heard what she said felt that such a claim was worth investigating. They themselves approached the Lord; they listened to Him, believed and acclaimed Him the Saviour of the world.

A summary. One poor woman - an encounter with Christ - a witness as to who He was - her testimony - a whole company of Samaritans believe.

Healing of the nobleman's son

In the end of this chapter we read of the healing of the nobleman's son. This man had discovered that the Lord had come from Judah into Galilee and having heard of His reputation comes with the request that he will heal his son who was at the point of death. His faith does not seem to be of the robust sort as was found in the centurion and recorded in Matthew 8 but nevertheless faith was there and the Lord was prepared to honour it. His answer is "Go thy way; thy son liveth". And so it was - at the very hour that the Lord spoke the child recovered. This miracle had happened in Cana which you will remember was the village where the Lord had carried out his first miracle and both of which are spoken of in the Scriptures as signs. The Lord had said to the nobleman "Except ye see signs and wonders ye will not believe" and Paul writes that the Jews seek a sign. I think that both of these signs may have a dual meaning. In the first place both give evidence as to His person. Peter, preaching on the day of Pentecost, had announced to that vast company, "Ye men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a man approved of God among you by miracles and wonders and signs." Secondly, the changing of water into wine at the marriage feast in Cana was a sign of the Lord's glory in a coming day when He will be married to Israel, his earthly bride. A fulfilment of Isaiah 62:4-5: "Thou shalt no more be termed Forsaken, neither shall thy land be termed Desolate; but thou shalt be called Hephzibah, and thy land Beulah; for the Lord delighteth in thee and thy land shall be married. For as a young marieth a virgin, so shall thy sons marry thee and as the bridegroom rejoiceth over the bride so shall thy God rejoice over thee." The Lord had said "Thy son liveth" and this had been confirmed by his servants - a picture of the restoring to life of the nation of Israel.

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