

Lent 3
19/3/2017

Mark the Evangelist

Romans 5:1-11
Psalm 95
John 4:5-26

On finding the right life partner

At the centre of this morning's gospel story is a woman with a sad record when it comes to her relationships. If her history with husbands has not simply been dumb, tragic luck – 5 times a widow! – the story tends to invite all kinds of moral judgements, whether of the woman herself, or of the men who have perhaps used and abused her, or of the culture and society in which such things could happen.

I want this morning to focus on what we are told is the woman's relationship history but, in doing so, to shift our focus from the typical literal reading of her experience to a more allegorical reading. The advantage of this way of treating the text is that it allows us to let the woman have her own issues – whatever they may have been – but also allows her experiences become something which might still be ours, even if six husbands or wives has not been quite the shape of our particular problems.

Marriage appears a number of times in the Old Testament as a metaphor for the relationship between Israel and its God. You might recall the story of the prophet Hosea, who is told by God,

Go, take for yourself a wife of whoredom and have children of whoredom, for the land commits great whoredom by forsaking the LORD. (Hosea 1.2)

This is not comfortable language for us today, as we're aware that terms like "whore" tend to lay rather more blame for sexual immorality at the feet of the woman than the man (cf. John 8.1-11, from which the man is absent). This is not a sensitivity the Scriptures display (although cf. the story of Susanna and the elders in Daniel 13 [OT Apocrypha]). Even then, the point of the instruction to Hosea was not to make a judgement about Gomer, whom he marries, but to make a judgement about Israel. God's charge is that the relationship between God and Israel is like that between a husband and a wife, and that Israel has been unfaithful, seeking other "husbands". It helps greatly here to know the Hebrew word for "husband" and some of the nuances of its meaning. The word for husband is "baal", which many of you will recognise as the name of one (or a number) of the gods in the Old Testament who stands as a tantalising option for the Israelites. Elijah, for example, has a great context with 450 of the priests of Baal (1 Kings 18) – a test of which was really the most powerful God, Baal or Yahweh.

In fact, the word "baal" has a range of meanings including husband, keeper, master, lord. There is, then, an extended pun being run in the Old Testament as the word for "husband" or "lord" is now applied to a marital partner, now to a god or lord. For Israel to have turned its back on the God of the Exodus is for it to have taken *another* baal, another lord, or another husband. This background makes it possible to read the Samaritan woman's marital history in terms much deeper than focussing on her personal tragedy or relationship failures would suggest. The woman comes to be representative of anyone who seeks after false baals, false husbands, false keepers, false saviours.

The fact that in her case these false baals were *actually* husbands – real, tangible men – opens up for us the range of possible things which might function for us in this way. For the baals and the gods are not simply “spiritual” things, of concern only to those who believe in the gods or have some kind of religious bent. Religious or secular, believer or atheist, we are all prone to build our lives on false foundations, to seek meaning, peace, wholeness, in things which cannot actually provide them. Reading the story allegorically, the woman has had six husbands not simply because a run of bad luck saw 5 good men die on her or six scoundrels offer themselves as the answer, or not simply because she was of too weak character to sustain the relationship through difficult times (or whatever), but because such baals are not the answer to the deeper thirsts that she, and each of us, has. These are false baals, false gods, inadequate responses to the questions and needs which ache in her heart, and in ours also.

The question put to us by Jesus’ meeting with the Samaritan woman is, What are the baals – the five-plus-one husbands – in our lives? What have we joined ourselves to, and broken away from or had taken away from us, only to join ourselves again to something else? The options are many and various, and few of the baals which tempt us look anything like the Samaritan woman’s own testing. Yet their name is legion: Education, intellect, good looks, reputation, money, children, family, partners, health, youth, tradition and heritage, culture, nation or race or religion – these are among the things which offer themselves as guarantors of life, and so which fill us with some meaning, and so on which we spend enormous time and energy.

There might be nothing wrong in any of these things themselves, except for the nature of their hold on us, and what we therefore invest (or over-invest) in them, and the effects those investments actually have on us and on others. For each such thing will be found to be fickle, unreliable, *unfaithful*, if we invest it with some kind of *ultimate* meaning. And so we will thirst, long, partner-up again.

The marriage metaphor for the relationship between God and his people is a powerful one because it encapsulates matters of faithfulness and unfaithfulness, it evokes intimacy and also the pain of distance and separation. But most important in the Scriptures’ use of the metaphor is that the point is not, in the end, to emphasise the failings of the wife – of Israel, or Gomer, or the church (cf. Ephesians 5.32), or the woman by the well. The point is to emphasise the faithfulness of the *true* baal, the true Lord. For as much as God makes the accusations of unfaithfulness against his people, these accusations are made in order to call us back to the one who waits, who *will* receive us back, whose own faithfulness to the covenant will see the relationship restored:

“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.”

To push the metaphor of marriage and the pun on baal one step further, we could say that in this story Jesus offers himself as a *seventh* “husband” for the woman, seven being a number which in scriptures is associated with fullness, richness, completion. To one such as her, coming to a well on a hot and dry day, and to each one of us in our own likeness to her, there is offered a different *kind* of water, such that should we drink it, we will not thirst again, we will never *need* to turn to another baal, another lord: I am that for which you thirst, for whom you thirst.

We gather here today, and each Sunday, to hear a call away from all the bad couplings we are prone to make to one which will really bring us peace and freedom. In Jesus we are joined to a different *kind* of baal, a different kind of Lord. In him we see the

contours of the life a human creature might joyfully live in relation to her creator. And by the grace of that same creator, we find ourselves not accused of our bad partnerships but simply called to the better one: a spring of water gushing up to life in all its fullness.

However much we might be prone to lose the way, to chase after things which will not bring us the life we really desire, we profess a faithful God who, though saddened or angered by our poor choices, nevertheless calls us back, again and again and again and again and again and again to himself.

And, in hearing and responding to that call, we find not only a faithful God, but ourselves, thirst quenched and souls revived in his life-giving stream.

For this gift of God, in which is found the spirit and truth we all long for, all thanks be to God, now and always. Amen.
