

Reflection on Sunday 20 October 2024

by Forbes Mutch, Lay Leader of Worship

Gospel reading: John 4: 1-26

Overcoming Prejudice

The gospel reading at the start of John 4, where Jesus enters a town in Samaria and meets a Samaritan woman by a well, is a masterclass in how not to be prejudiced.

I've always thought of myself as not being a prejudiced person and I've worked hard over the years to break down my instinctive dislikes about certain types of people. But maybe I haven't been universally successful. I have to admit that there are some occasions and situations when I do doubt the validity of my own values. One of them is when I'm making a cup of tea and another is when I'm in an airport departure lounge.

In our kitchen at home, we have a set of mugs. Each mug – you may have seen the ones I'm talking about – represents a Penguin paperback book. They used to sell them in Waterstones. We have a *Brighton Rock* mug – I love this one, it's my favourite, I'm a big fan of Graham Greene. We have *Great Expectations* by Charles Dickens – another favourite, I like the title, full of Christian optimism; *1984*, *Brave New World*, *A Farewell to Arms* – all great books.

And then we have *My Man Jeeves* by P G Wodehouse.

I don't like P G Wodehouse. Don't ask me why, the world of P G Wodehouse has never appealed to me, so I've never really read anything by P G Wodehouse. But this means that I have also never made a cup of tea in *My Man Jeeves*. It's a perfectly good mug. It's just like all the others, but it sits at the back of the shelf, rejected, an outcast because of prejudice; prejudice based on my ignorance of the work of author P G Wodehouse. When I think of this, it makes me question the strength of my un-prejudice.

My un-prejudice was also tested recently when I found myself sitting in the departure lounge of London Heathrow Terminal 5. I was travelling alone to New York to catch up with my wife, Jenny, who had flown out there a few days earlier.

Travelling sounds romantic and exciting, which it is, but, as anyone with any experience of journeying can verify, travelling often involves a lot of sitting around waiting; waiting at bus stations, waiting in traffic jams, waiting on trains, waiting at airports.

If you're like me, you don't enjoy leaving things until the last minute and I tend to arrive at the airport three hours before take-off. The other day, I had a particularly fast-track experience going through check-in and security and so, there I was in the airport departure lounge with over two hours to kill. I looked around, I selected my Pret a Manger cauliflower cheese. I found a seat, I could see a departure board. And then it began: the

waiting. And this is when a darker, irritable side to my nature emerges.

Because what do you do when you're sitting in a busy airport lounge? You pretend to look at your phone or read a book, but what you're actually doing is 'people watching'. And the danger with people watching is that it can turn very quickly into 'people judging'.

Be honest: how often have you sat, looking at the people around you, and found yourself making judgements? We don't voice those judgements out of politeness but we sub-consciously categorise people; we herd them into 'types' or 'groups', making sweeping assumptions and generalisations about people based on superficial characteristics such as gender, age, size, clothes, nationality; all the things that we as Christians say aren't important but which we as humans sub-consciously observe and which we use to influence our attitudes. Or am I the only person prepared to admit to this?

In the airport lounge, I look around me. Why is that man on his second pint of beer at this time of the morning? Honestly! That girl is wearing such a skimpy T-shirt and shorts, she might as well not be wearing any clothes at all. It's disgusting. Why on earth can't that woman stop her two-year toddler from crying like that? Honestly, young mothers today don't know how to say 'no' to their children. Doesn't she realise that we all have to listen to her screaming brat?

Jesus, on the other hand, sets a much better example.

He turns up in a town in Samaria. He sits down by the well and is joined by a Samaritan woman. I thought about this story the other week, when I was sitting by the well of Pret a Manger in London Heathrow Terminal 5. I like the story for three reasons.

Firstly, it turns out that the woman is not only a Samaritan, but she is not a respectable, religious woman either. She is an outcast from her own community, drawing water from the well in the heat of the midday sun when no-one else is around. But Jesus, typical Jesus, says hello.

In those days, in that society, a man speaking to a woman he has not been introduced to was very unusual, even scandalous. More than that, this woman is a Samaritan – somebody a respectable Jew would never speak to. But Jesus does. Jesus is not concerned with the customs or taboos or the prejudices of the time. I like the story because Jesus, as always, breaks the rules.

And this story confirms that Jesus mixes with all people; not just with respectable people, and religious people. Jesus mixes with every kind of person. Jesus mixes with everybody and talks to everybody because he cares for people. That is a pretty good business model for our lives even today.

Thirdly, this story reminds me that while God's son was on Earth, he was completely human. Christ is thirsty, so he sits by a well and asks for a drink. He has no prejudice about who he asks, and he wouldn't have minded if the woman had offered him a drink in a *My Man Jeeves* mug. It makes no difference to him.



There is, actually, a fourth point about this story, which is probably more important than Christ's calm lack of prejudice and his all-seeing nature, and that is the way God uses the most unexpected people to build his kingdom on earth.

In the Palestinian culture of the day, women were definitely regarded as being on a social strata below men; a Samaritan woman in a Jewish society would have been seen as even lower, and a Samaritan woman with a tarnished reputation in a Jewish society would be even lower still. And, yet, it is this same person that God chooses to meet Jesus; it is this unlikely person who receives the Water of Life, and it is this person who rushes back to her estranged community, overflowing with such enthusiasm for what has happened that the townspeople go out to the well in the heat of the day to meet Christ and hear his teaching first hand. This tarnished Samaritan woman has evolved from being an outcast to an effective missionary.

That's very encouraging for all of us.

I remember this story in the airport departure lounge and I stop judging people I don't know. I concentrate on my cauliflower cheese and, eventually, I board the plane. I get priority boarding because I have a false leg and I am one of the first passengers on board. I find my seat.

Because of my leg, it's hard to balance sometimes and I find it difficult to place my luggage in the overhead locker. I turn to the person behind me in the gangway.

It's the woman who couldn't control her two-year-old toddler.

'Hello', I say. 'I see your boy has calmed down, then'.

She smiles sweetly and says: 'Yes, he's slightly autistic and doesn't like airports. Too much going on. But he's calm on the plane. He'll be fine. Would you like some help with your bag? Let me lift it up for you.'

And I say: 'Thank you, that would be a great help'.

I say thank you for more than one reason.

I say: 'You remind me of a Samaritan woman'. I don't think she quite understands, but she smiles. It is the smile of the Kingdom of God. Amen