

St.Lawrence 15.03.'20

The woman at the well.

1.

As a little boy, I was taught always to raise my cap to a woman. Yes, I used to wear a cap. It was part of the school uniform. And I must admit I thought I looked pretty smart in it.

I don't think I ever thought I was insulting women or that there was something superior about males. I do remember learning at some stage that the reason why I always had to walk on the outside of the path and let the woman - or, on rare occasions, the girl - walk on the inside was so that I could more easily draw my sword and protect her from attack. Not that I often wore a sword.

I suppose, then, that without realising it, I was actually born into a culture that thought of women as 'the weaker sex' and that it was an element of maleness that we had a duty to 'protect' them. I was intrigued recently to hear a certain royalty-connected young woman publicly call for men to 'protect' their womenfolk. It seemed a rather nice recall to past outlooks after years of radical change.

Because, of course, there has been change. Young women have stood up for me recently on the London Underground - once, even, a young man! The first time it happened it took me completely by surprise. The boy in me would still have been raising my cap and standing up for her, and there she was standing up for me! As far as I could tell she wasn't also wearing a sword on her left hip ready to protect me from muggers and robbers, though I didn't dare look too closely! I was very happy to accept her offer and spent some time smiling inwardly at the lifetime of change I had so far lived through.

I suspect most men of my generation still find it hard to grasp just how much suppression of women's individuality our male gender has been responsible for. Only in recent years have we come to realise that there have always been as many female as male artists, composers, poets, musicians, writers, thinkers, pastors - or certainly would have been if only the male tendency to expect women to keep 'in their proper place' hadn't suppressed their aspirations down the centuries. I do cringe to hear men in some of my own friendship circles to this day talk about 'the wife' or 'the little woman'!

It can, for many men, be difficult to appreciate just how widely women have been, and still are, victimised and persecuted for their gender, even in devout Christian circles. Indeed, organised religion in all its varieties have been responsible for as much gender discrimination as have secular societies.

I was also brought up to regard Germans as people to avoid at all costs. There was a German woman who lived a few hundred yards down the road from us (yes, I do still use words like 'yards' and 'feet'!) (and 'pints' and 'gallons').

Her son went to the same school as I did. I don't remember ever talking to him, and, on reflection, I don't remember him still being there when I got to the age of moving on to senior school. I don't think I ever taunted him or mocked him, though I know some of my school mates did. His mother seemed to get on pretty well with people in the shop next

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door to where she lived, 'though I do have a vague memory of the shop owners saying how relieved they were when they got 'sent away'.

Because, of course, at that time we were at war with them; and we knew they were doing terrible things to us and to other people, bombing us, shooting people, putting people in prison - just as we knew they had when my parents were younger in what they called 'the Great War.'

I knew what dreadful people the Germans were because I used to hear about it on what we used to call 'the wireless'. And some of the comics I enjoyed reading had pictures showing what terrible people they were and how cruel and ruthless and evil-looking their soldiers were compared with our brave soldiers who were all good-looking and would never dream of doing the dreadful things they all did. You can imagine how we felt, later when, not long after the war, in my secondary school a German teacher turned up to teach us, of all things, music. He didn't have a very good time there and he didn't seem to stay long.

What on earth has all this to do with today's Gospel reading!

Well, think about it. Jesus' disciples had only left him for a few hours or so to do some shopping and when they got back what did they find him doing? Sitting by a well and talking religion and theology with a woman! And not just any woman, a Samaritan woman! And, just to make matters worse, clearly an immoral Samaritan woman - otherwise she would have been at the well earlier in the day when decent women were there, not half way through the day like this one.

In that society at that time, unless she was a recognised prophetess, like Anna at the Temple, a woman's place was, well, in the home. She was the one in the family who would make sure the husband had the background support he needed to pursue his job of earning a living. She was also the one whose job it was to make sure that the children were brought up knowing the Scriptures, especially the Law and that they followed the rituals and practices of the religion. Yes, of course she could have ideas of her own about it all, but they were to be kept to herself, not openly discussed with respectable Jewish teachers and rabbis, especially in public.

As for being a Samaritan, well they were pretty well the equivalent in their day of the Germans in my childhood. Not exactly the enemy at that stage, but not far from it. Judean people had remained faithful to their religion and the purity of their race throughout history by resisting attempts to get them to intermarry with the racially impure. People of Samaria, however - well, who knows what racially defiling blood was in them.

Jesus is completely unaffected by any of that. The two of them can sit together and tease and challenge each other without any reservations about race, about gender or even about personal behaviour. This person with whom Jesus is happy to spend time and enjoy a fascinating conversation is just that, a person.

3.

Did he, I wonder, deliberately choose to be at that well at that specific time of day knowing what particular sort of person he would be likely to meet there? Was it, perhaps, an object lesson he felt he had to lay on for his disciples who would have to come searching for him? I wonder. He did, after all, deliberately choose a Samaritan to be the hero of his most famous story about helping people in need. And somehow it seems appropriate that the first person recorded as talking with him after his resurrection was a woman.

If there is any message to come out from this Gospel passage for us and for our society today, for me it's this. If we are to live as his disciples, we have to unlearn any prejudice in our minds, whether deliberately implanted or subconsciously imbibed, that leads us to think of people as members of a gender, or a race, or a social class, or a sexual orientation, or a political persuasion, or a particular religion - or even a classified age-group!

A person is a person; and every person is one who needs our care, our friendship and our compassion and understanding. That's one of the principles by which disciples of the One who had that conversation with the person at the well have to learn to live.