

10am HC Sunday 19 March 2017

Lent 3

Ex 17:1-7 John 4:5-42

Encountering God, means God encounters us.

PRAY

To recap:

1. Changes our story
2. Brings life

As a family we really like listening to audio books and recently we listened to one called “Framed” by Frank Cotrell-Boyce. It is about a community in Wales where all the people are changed for the better by the power of art. They begin to think, to create, to relate to each other differently, all because of what they see. Seeing a picture, leads to seeing themselves and each other in different ways. Seeing impacts, influences people.

We might expect that seeing Jesus impacts us, but my point today is that Jesus is impacted *by* us too. Encountering God means God encounters us.

But I hear the objection: God is immovable and unchangeable. Think of the words to the hymn *Immortal Invisible*:

1. Immortal, invisible, God only wise,
In light inaccessible hid from our eyes,
Most blessèd, most glorious, the Ancient of Days,
Almighty, victorious, thy great Name we praise.

2. **Unresting, unhasting, and silent as light,
Nor wanting, nor wasting, thou rulest in might;**
Thy justice like mountains high soaring above
Thy clouds which are fountains of goodness and love.

3. To all life thou givest — to both great and small;
In all life thou livest, the true life of all;
We blossom and flourish as leaves on the tree,
And wither and perish—**but naught changeth thee.**

4. Great Father of glory, pure Father of light,
Thine angels adore thee, all veiling their sight;
All laud we would render: O help us to see
'Tis only the splendour of light hideth thee.

5. Great Father of glory, pure Father of light,
Thine angels adore Thee, all veiling their sight;
But of all Thy rich graces this grace, Lord, impart
Take the veil from our faces, the vile from our heart.

6. All laud we would render; O help us to see
'Tis only the splendour of light hideth Thee,
And so let Thy glory, Almighty, impart,
Through Christ in His story, Thy Christ to the heart.

And there is certainly difference and even distance in God. If God were not like that, God would not be God. To understand God fully would be to contain God and therefore overcome God and become divine ourselves. But some of this hymn is a bit questionable:

Silent as light? Sometimes, but primarily God is the one who speaks. It is the word of God that broke the silence of chaos with the noise of creation. Jesus is the word come into the world to save us from the void of destruction.

“We wither and perish but naught changest thee.”

Except that Jesus changed. Jesus was born a baby changed grew and learnt. Luke's gospel tells us that very clearly. So this famous hymn might have some shortcomings – until that is, the last verse. Here the strong sense is that Jesus can change our hearts, or is it that Jesus at the heart of God, F,S and HS can make vulnerability part of God?

Why is this even important?

If God really does encounter us, then God does that by seeing us just as we are. And that takes us to our gospel reading in John 4 and this amazing encounter Jesus has with an unnamed woman. It is the longest recorded conversation Jesus has with anyone, I believe, and he has it with the wrong type of person from the wrong part of the country.

Let me tell you a bit about this woman.

1. V 6 She is ashamed – noon is a rubbish time to fill your water jars. She is there to avoid people.
2. V 9 She is in pain – excluded from her community and part of a hated race

3. V 18 She is in prison – 5 husbands do not indicate that she is promiscuous so much as she has been abused. Maybe she is using her sexuality to get some protection from men, or maybe she is a thing, passed on from one man to the next, trafficked, and oppressed treated as worthless. Either way is it not freedom.

When I read this story I remember that I am a feminist because Jesus is. Nothing about this story conforms to what was expected of a man at the time. Jesus treats this woman as equal to any man and offers her insight into who He is and what He is about that speaks of the most dignified and respectful encounter. And that is what I want to come back to, encounter.

Because Jesus encounters the woman as she is. He sees her shame, her pain and her prison. Jesus sees all of her. Jesus is unembarrassed by her story, undeflected by her defensiveness and undeterred by her sex or race. Jesus enters into her world and her pain in v 16-18 and invites the woman into a new world to come in v 21.

Life lived in the company of Jesus is not plain sailing. In my own life I have known versions of shame, pain and prison at times. Most of those experiences came from the times that James had cancer and the terrible trauma of that journey. Happily James is well now, but we never take his health for granted. And there is still pain, other pain, and grief that even allowing for my generally chirpy persona I carry with me just as we all do because this life is tough. And knowing Jesus does not lift us out of it as if on Aladdin's magic carpet.

In fact, the example of Jesus is that following Him gets us more involved in shame, pain and prison. Jesus came into the world and became a refugee, with a foster dad and a teenaged mum. Jesus grew up to spend His time with the outsiders, touching the sick, being among the poor, eating with the humiliated, listening to the stories of women in prisons fashioned of culture and religion. Jesus opted into their world and encountered their ache. So when Jesus died on the cross, ashamed, in pain and imprisoned by death, itself all the encountering reached its peak.

Is God immovable and distant? Not our God. Our God has experienced our grief, carried our shame, shares our

sickness and is moved to death by encountering us just as we are. If we take Jesus out of the trinity we have created an immovable idol of whom we might sing “and naught changes thee.”

But Jesus is God as is Father and Holy Spirit, the 3 in 1. That Jesus died is the proof that God sees us, God encounters us and loves us as we are. That Jesus rose again is the proof that the love that goes out from God is literally death defying.

Does that mean we do not get sick, or die or grieve. No. We love the most and so we feel pain the most. But when we in shame, pain or any kind of prison, are met and seen, encountered by God who has gone out of God’s way to find us we experience rescue.

The woman here in John 4 is given confidence and a purpose in telling her community about Jesus. Does her relationship with men improve? We don’t know. Does the emancipation of women happen in her town? It’s unlikely. Does she still age and die? We must conclude so. But she is not alone. She has encountered Jesus and Jesus has encountered her.

Today the offer is the same. Jesus is here to meet you as you are. With all the pain that you have. Will it go away? Maybe not but that thirst for it to mean something, for you to mean something might well be satisfied by the living water Jesus still offers to all He encounters.

So now we are going to take a moment to pause. I would like you to take the piece of paper that was given to you on the way in and I would like you to fill it in. So far it says Jesus when you see me, see

What do you want Jesus to encounter and carry for you? Broken relationships? Your own scars from being ignored or unwelcome? Illness? Grief?

As you hold the paper, we can ask for the living water that Jesus offers. Remember the baptism water? Water is the symbol of the start of our life with God. Drink deep from the promise that God loves you and wants to be with you in thick and thin. You might like to say these words as a prayer in your heart after me:

God, life is hard and I need you to see me. I need you to love me. I need your living water to refresh me. Please come, Holy Spirit and help me to see Jesus. Let me encounter you afresh, God. Bring me the dignity, healing and freedom you promise that you also see me. In Jesus' name. Amen.

If you have never prayed a prayer like that before please tell the person you came with today or come and tell me so that we can encourage you and help you on your way.

Amen.