

Those whom the world has forgotten
23 March 2014

John 4:5-42

All of us will have met people who made such huge impressions on us that our lives have never been quite the same since. They may have been devoted parents or grandparents, inspirational teachers, or favourite writers and musicians. I can certainly think of people who have left indelible marks on the person I have become. Such as my friend Sam.

Like many of my friends, Sam was far from conventional. She defiantly refused to fit the mould into which society expected her to fit. With her shocking peroxide hair, and clothing that made a strong statement, Sam turned heads everywhere she went. Meeting Sam for the first time was usually an interesting experience. She could come across as being frighteningly staunch, yet the only times I ever really saw her angry were when issues of social justice were at stake, and when people who could not speak out for themselves were being exploited. And behind her sometimes brash exterior was an individual who was not only selflessly compassionate, but also very vulnerable.

I do not remember how Sam labelled her spiritual identity, for we did not really concern ourselves with labels. It was our spiritual and ethical principles, and how well we followed them, that mattered. Although I would say that she probably would not have been especially keen on the label 'Christian', mainly because she would have struggled to identify with some other people who called themselves Christians, but used their Christianity as a platform from which to condemn people who were different to them. But Sam did some of the most Christ-like work I have known anyone to do.

Organisations like the City Mission do wonderful work with the homeless and the marginalised, but Sam went to places that City Mission could never reach. Having been on the margins herself gave Sam the credibility to go back there. She reached out to some of society's most rejected and despised people. Such as street prostitutes, intravenous drug addicts, and people with AIDS. One night, Sam asked me to accompany her on her rounds through some of the murkier enclaves of Cuba Street. We walked through dark streets and alleyways, and met various people I would have preferred to have avoided. Because it was hardly a good look to be seen talking to prostitutes in shop doorways in the middle of the night. But they all seemed to know Sam, who was right at home with them. An older transsexual prostitute summed her up that night by

telling her that she was an angel. An angel she might well have been, but Sam, a young woman with so much to give, died tragically at the age of 31.

When Jesus spoke with the woman at the well, she was shocked. The last thing she would have expected would have been for a Jew to speak to her, for to any other Jew, she would have been a complete outcast.¹ Firstly, she was a Samaritan. At that time, Jews and Samaritans had a mutual loathing for each other. They had once been kindred, but the Samaritans had committed what was to a strict Jew was an unforgivable crime. They had intermarried with foreigners. And they had been feuding ever since.

Secondly, she was a woman. In Jesus' time, there was no notion of gender equality. Women were held in such low esteem in Jewish society that it was even questioned whether they had souls. A Rabbi was not supposed to greet a woman in public, not even his wife or daughter. To do so was to invite great scandal.

Thirdly, she had been married five times and was now cohabiting with someone else who was not her husband. Even by today's standards, that would be a little out of the ordinary. Although not unheard of. But this was two thousand years ago, and she faced considerable moral condemnation. Her own people avoided her, which is why she went to Jacob's well to draw water instead collecting that which was available in her town. She could not have been a more of an outcast to an upright Jew, unless she had been a leper as well.

But this didn't bother Jesus. He didn't concern Himself with how His reputation might suffer from being seen conversing in public with a Samaritan woman of supposedly dubious moral character. His disciples were a little shocked², but they knew better than to ask what He was doing. They had learned by then that Jesus sometimes could and would do the unexpected.

The woman was also surprised that Jesus had spoken with her. She was intrigued by His willingness to talk, challenged by His theology, and ultimately won over by His upfront disclosure of His knowledge of her private life.

The central metaphor of this text is water. Jesus was thirsty. They were by a well. And although He wanted a drink, Jesus offered refreshment that would last forever. Water is such a dominant image that it would be easy to overlook a very significant feature of the

narrative. Jesus told the woman He was the Messiah. He would evade the question when pressed by religious authorities. But He happily disclosed his identity to a Samaritan woman with a dodgy reputation.

Today, I would like to share with you two things I have come to realise in recent years. The first is that God works through those we would least expect. Last year, I graduated from my theological institute, after studying under respected and learned academics. But when it comes to actually putting the gospels into practice, I have learned the most from people on the margins. I have already spoken of the work of Sam. I also think of some of the insights I have heard shared by recovering alcoholics. I recall an insightful discussion about the Letter of James I had with a friend who was being detained under the Mental Health Act. I remember the surprising conversation I once had with some Mongrel Mob members in a pub in Taupo. And I cannot leave out my friend Marvin, who is on death row in Ohio, and whose faith is nothing short of inspirational.

The second is that by loving others we prove our love for God. Having compassion for society's most rejected and despised people is a powerful demonstration that unconditional love really is available to everyone. Every person the world seems to have forgotten is a person who deserves to be loved and respected. To be able to serve them like the Christ did is a privilege.

Christian ministry is revealing the Christ in word and action, but for people to see the Christ in us, we must see the Christ in them, for we need to remember we are all created in God's image. And when we give food to the hungry, refresh the thirsty, welcome strangers, clothe the naked, care for the sick, and visit prisoners, we do this for the Christ.³

Darryl Ward

23 March 2014

www.theword.tk

¹ John 4:9

² John 4:27

³ Matthew 25:34-30