

THE WELL IS DEEP

Week of Prayer for Christian Unity

This sermon was delivered at All Saints, Stamford,
Lincolnshire, Sunday January 25th 2015

© The Rt Revd Dr Stephen Platten

Some of you may have visited Dover Castle, in Kent. If you haven't, it's well worth the visit. Built by the Norman invaders to stop others doing what they did, it stands high on the *White Cliffs*, looking down on the shadow of Louis Blériot's aircraft which landed there at the end of his pioneering cross-channel flight. In the last two decades the castle has been 'pushed up' to become more of a visitor 'attraction'. But in the past there were two highlights for gruesome little boys. First was a gulley in the wall emptying on to a narrow stairway. Here the soldiers would have poured on to potential invaders, boiling oil and molten lead! Second, is a very deep well: the guide would light an oily rag and drop it in – it made a cracking noise and snuffed out on hitting the bottom. They don't appear to do it now – perhaps the well's full of sooty oily rags!

Wells have a fascination, especially if they are really deep. There is an element of mystery about them. Indeed there is a famous quotation from the theologian, George Tyrrell, writing about another – German – theologian, Adolf von Harnack. Harnack had been a vigorous researcher for the so-called 'historical Jesus'. What was Jesus like, if you stripped off the varnish imposed by biblical writers and later commentators? Harnack painted his own picture of Jesus, which Tyrrell described as Harnack peering into a long dark well and seeing nothing but his own reflection at the bottom. Harnack made Jesus in his own image!

But the story which we heard from John's Gospel, a moment ago, is very different. Some considerable degree of mystery surrounds the character of Jesus. Let's look a little more carefully. John's Gospel is very different in feel from the first three gospels. We hear more from the mouth of Jesus in John's Gospel. Indeed there is a pattern which begins with a fairly limited number of miracles. Each miracle is then followed by dialogue with disciples or others. The dialogue then issues into a monologue from Jesus, often introducing one of those portentous *I am* sayings – I am the bread of life, I am the resurrection and the life etc.

But this encounter is rather different. It's a very personal encounter with the Samaritan woman. There is a complicated dialogue. In that dialogue, Jesus tells her so much about herself. Twice, we hear her saying: 'He told me all that I ever did.' Of himself, Jesus reveals the power of God in him, but much mystery remains.

What might all this have to say to us, in a very different world two millennia on? Well, already, both in this story - and in Tyrrell's rather tart comment to Harnack – it is clear that all mystery cannot be stripped away. For the mystery which clothes

Jesus is elemental to his charisma. We see it equally sharply, if differently in Mark's Gospel, and also in Paul's complex theological reasoning. Such mystery reminds us that Jesus in the *Incarnate One*. He is clothed in the necessity of God, in God's otherness from us.

Yet still, in the story, and slightly differently, as I've hinted, from much of John's gospel, there's more action, more dialogue. Jesus engages with the woman and his disciples as a fully fleshly human being. The beginning of the story is water, the stuff of life. Jesus goes further and tells her that he offers living water. He also engages with her over the vexed issue of the worship of the Samaritans and its strong contrast with the pattern of Jewish worship. Still today one can visit Mount Gerizim and see something of the pattern of Samaritan worship; they are now just a tiny sect. So divinity and humanity coexist in John's Jesus.

As we conclude this Christian Unity Week, perhaps this profound tale offers us two rather contrasting reflections. Often we say just how much is the same in all that we do – even in our worship. But actually what makes us interesting is how we differ! The Methodist treasury of hymnody, the Anglican tradition of the litany and choral worship, Orthodox patterns of rich worship, and the Roman Catholic understanding of the Mass. Aren't these the things we might see celebrated even in this week? Perhaps you have done so? It does indeed point to a deep well of rich tradition.

Second, in this story, Jesus begins with the severely practical – with water. In dealing with the severely practical we can rarely live or tell the gospel alone. What do I mean? For many years now I have been associated with the Anglican Church in Rome. At the Centre we have always been rooted in theology as we should be. But in this last year, we have become the base for the Pope and the Archbishop of Canterbury to launch a new initiative to end modern slavery. Very severely practical - suddenly people have begun to notice the Centre in Rome. Similarly as a curate, I was much involved with organising a *Way of the Cross* in the streets of Oxford. 4,000 people came – 300 were included in making it happen. Our parish could not have begun to do it alone. At the end, I had no idea who were Catholics, Pentecostals, Baptists, URC or Orthodox.

So, let us rediscover our mutual treasures, the richness of worship and mystery. Let us also work together for the Kingdom Jesus came to inaugurate. The well is indeed that deep.

Amen

Reading

John. 4. 1-42