

Last week Dolapo started off our series of talks based on Paula Gooder's book looking at the Women of Holy Week. However Revd Jon has given me an additional challenge - the two women that I have been allocated to talk about today aren't featured in the book at all! So here we go!

We've just heard two very different accounts of when Jesus interacts with two unnamed women – he knows every detail of their lives without having ever met them before and both receive freedom through him. In the same way nothing we do is unknown to God and we are all offered his unconditional love, grace, forgiveness and freedom.

So, let's take a closer look first at the woman who is brought forward to be stoned to death for adultery.

She must have been terrified – she had been caught in the act of adultery and dragged away by a band of men who wanted to kill her.

But let's put the spotlight on that a bit more – so she was caught in the act – so there was someone else with her! Old Testament law demanded that both parties be subjected to the same penalty – ie stoning to death. But where was the man? The teachers of the law and Pharisees were not out for justice at all - the fact that they only brought the woman before Jesus just highlights their hypocrisy - they wanted to trap him and see what he would do.

Would he allow the woman to go free and publicly disobey the law - or - approve of her killing and forfeit his reputation as offering all sinners forgiveness. His response is so clever that it makes the enactment of the legal punishment impossible without him actually publicly dismissing the law!

But he doesn't overlook her sin – as at the end he tells her to turn away from it.

Now let's go back to the woman at the well. We know a little more about her. She was a Samaritan. And they were a mixed race - part Jew - part Gentile - and generally disliked by both groups.

We also know that she was a social outcast looked down upon and shunned by her own people. We meet her coming to draw water from the community well in the middle of the day – no one would normally do this. Collecting water would be done in the cool of the morning or early evening – everyone would gather for a good chat to find out what was going on in their community. Our woman was going when no-one else would be there – she'd been marked out as immoral – an unmarried woman living openly with the sixth in a series of men.

But let's use our spotlight again – women at that time had no power. It wouldn't have been her choice to divorce one husband after another, the power to do this was with the man. She had been discarded by each of them in turn. Perhaps she couldn't get pregnant - that sadly was reason enough for divorce at that time. And now with her tarnished reputation she was living with someone who wouldn't even marry her.

Jesus's interaction with the Samaritan woman revealing to her that he was the Living Water, the Messiah, and all who came to him would be saved and made new not only transformed her life but was also a message for all people in all situations.

Now both women's stories have two voices speaking into their situations – those who condemned them on the one hand - and Jesus on the other.

All of us have different voices competing for attention and all too often we fail to recognise that the world or crowd or even those closest to us that we seek approval and affirmation from – doesn't actually have our best interests at heart. But God never wants us to be anything less than the best version of ourselves, he loves us unconditionally and wants us to succeed.

We see that Jesus wasn't fazed by either of these women's sins – he knew every detail of their history without them saying a word and similarly He seeks each of us out in spite of our situations.

How others view us really does not matter – what matters is our personal relationship with God.

We are all unique, we are all flawed. As Romans 3:23 says "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God". But God loves us all in spite of our broken imperfect lives and actively seeks each and every one of us out.

His compassion and grace doesn't mean we can ignore our sin, it's not a get out of jail free card – but it gives us the opportunity of a new life, free to walk in the Light of Christ.

We can all come before him just as we are - confess our weaknesses and wrongdoings and receive grace and mercy. God is always ready and willing to forgive and extend his grace. That grace empowers us to go forward and sin no more and be the person God created us to be.

Now let's follow the example of Paula Gooder's book – and imagine how these two women would have reacted to the events around the Easter story.

If they had been in the procession on Palm Sunday or in the crowd in Jerusalem what would their response have been? They know what Jesus has done for them and I think they would have sung and praised as loudly as anyone.

On Good Friday when the crowds shouted out "crucify Him" I can't imagine that these two women would have joined in - I think they would have been horrified at how quickly the mood had changed.

And then when he was crucified, I imagine they felt bewilderment and sorrow, shed tears for him and felt that empty hopelessness that can totally overwhelm. They knew what he had done for them, why did it have to end like this for him?

Then on Easter day, and the 40 days afterwards, and the ascension, I think they would have heard the story that he was alive, hoped, maybe doubted, wanted to believe and longed for it to be true.

And at Pentecost they would have heard Peter's message and believed and joined the church. What a testimony they would have had to share. They knew Jesus personally. Jesus had set them both free.

Each of us know what Jesus has done for us. We've discovered that no matter what we were like, nothing can separate us from the love of God.

He sent his own Son into this world to offer everyone salvation - offering all forgiveness and compassion, which we in turn can offer to those around us – allowing the Holy Spirit to work through our stories and our lives.

Amen.

Carol Elsasser, 13 March 2022

