

Worship in Spirit and in Truth

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In her commentary on St John's gospel in the *New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, Pheme Perkins writes:

The Johannine Community at the end of the First Century could not look upon or hear the historical Jesus. They were living at another stage. The stage of the Holy Spirit, living water that would be received in Jesus after he was glorified.¹

It seems to me that an exegesis of Chapter 4 of St John's gospel might throw further light on this judgement as well as illustrating the psychodynamics of 'conversion' and interpersonal encounter with Christ. Chapter 4 stands on its own in the gospel and is a brilliant theological construction. It is an intricately woven pattern of wordplay, humour, symbolism, obfuscation, at least on the part of the woman. An examination of the dynamic of interpersonal relating might begin with a reflection on how anyone of us feels when meeting someone for the first time. How do we decide whether or not we want the relationship to go any further than our simply remaining on polite or distant terms? The decision we take in such circumstances is very complex, acted out nearly always at the unconscious level and made in an instant. We decide that the person is interesting enough to reward further acquaintance or we just move away uttering a phrase of polite disengagement.

The story of the woman at the well is a story of an encounter which had a profound effect and which became an occasion for Christ to reveal that: 'The Father seeks those who will worship Him in Spirit and in Truth', a purpose which is at the heart of John's gospel and which encapsulates God's purpose in the Incarnation of His Son Jesus. In beginning our examination of this episode we might ask: did it happen or is the story a construction of the evangelist enabling him to make a theological point? We need not spend too much time on the first consideration since it is not essential to the point at issue in this article. However, Raymond Brown deals with the question of historicity at some length in his *commentary on St John's gospel* and suggests that it stems from a genuine tradition.² He points out that the gospel had spread

to Samaria some years after the ministry of Jesus. Philip preached there and the communities were later visited by Peter and John. Brown suggests that there is an intrinsic claim to plausibility in that the evangelist betrays a knowledge of local conditions and some feel for local colour. All of this leads him to argue for a substratum of traditional material which the evangelist has taken and formed into a superb theological scenario.

In the story we are told that Jesus started back to Galilee and had to pass through Samaria. The verb *edein* emphasises the aspect of necessity, it implies an inner urge, an imperative. There was, in fact, an alternative route, but Jesus did not take it. We are intended to see in this imperative an impulse of divine providence. That providence reigned in the life of the Samaritan woman also when she came to draw water from the well she would find Jesus waiting for her. When they did meet Jesus did an extraordinary thing, as John himself emphasises in the text. He asked the woman for a drink. The request is extraordinary for two reasons. Firstly it infringed against propriety: Jesus was alone and talking to a solitary woman and this would not have been thought appropriate according to the social customs of the time. Anyone observing this encounter would see Jesus and the woman as, in some sense, compromised. The reason for Jesus' solitude is given by the evangelist: his disciples have gone off to buy food. The picture being constructed is that of a hungry and thirsty Jesus. The woman appears to collude in this presentation since there is perhaps a hint of mockery in her attitude to Jesus. Has his own need driven him to break all the conventions? John paints a subtly ironic picture here since we know, although she does not, that it is in fact her need and not Jesus' need that is to be the focus of the entire episode.

The second surprising feature of the encounter is voiced by the woman herself when she remarks in a shocked fashion that Jesus, a Jew, should ask a Samaritan for a drink; Jews and Samaritans would normally have nothing to do with each other. Jesus makes a somewhat strange reply which both defines his own need and points to hers. "If you could only recognise God's gift and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink', you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water." At this point we come to a potent example of Johannine literary style which is quite central to the understanding of the way in which John fashions stories to bring out his essential theological vision. With an extraordinary directness the woman takes Jesus' statement in a literal way. "You have nothing to draw with, and the well is deep," she says and then goes on to ask where she can get some of this living water. At this point John resorts to a form of punning. In

verse 6 when Jesus sits down by the well, the word used to describe the water source is, in Greek, *pege*, which can mean a fountain or a well with flowing water. When the woman refers to the same source she uses the word *phrear*, which also means a well, but a source of a static type, something like a cistern. Jesus and the woman are seeing the well in drastically different ways.

At this point another theme is woven into the narrative. The well in question is Jacob's well. The woman then goes on to ask if Jesus is greater than their common ancestor, Jacob, who drank from this well and watered his sheep and his cattle there also. Irony thus spices the narrative form. Jesus is greater than Jacob, so the woman once more utters truth without realising it. Jesus replies in the same way as he does in the discourse about manna and the bread of life. Those who drank of the still water of Jacob's well were thirsty again, just as those who tasted of the manna in the desert were hungry again. But the bread and water that Jesus gives will ease the thirst and satisfy the hunger of all those who taste of them to such a degree that they will never feel the pain of hunger or thirst again. "Whoever drinks of this water that I shall give will become a fountain of living water (*pege*) welling up to eternal life." Still the woman operates at the literal level, and not without a certain self-regarding interest. "Give me this water, that I may not thirst, nor come here to draw." Her self-regard is not entirely misplaced. We are told at the beginning of the story that she came to draw water at about the "sixth hour", or about noon, that is, when the sun was at its highest and it was the hottest part of the day. We might ask why it is that a woman would come alone in the heat of the day to complete the arduous task of drawing water? In rural village communities the well is a meeting place for women intent on escaping the drudgery of housework for a short while. Drawing water and washing clothes at the village water source is a communal occasion when women can meet each other and exchange news. Could it be that the woman came at this time of the day precisely to avoid meeting her neighbours because her manner of life was known? When she asked Jesus for this living water she was asking for relief from thirst. If she had been free from thirst she would not have to endure this odd exclusionary daily ritual which emphasised the marginality of her existence. At this point in the story we are introduced to a further level of the subtle inter-personal dynamic of the story. Jesus appears to change tack completely. He orders her to go and fetch her husband. It is a command that comes straight from the blue and seems to have no relation to what has gone before. The woman does not lie in her response, but she is economical with the truth. Her reply is evasive and gives nothing away. "I have no husband." Jesus knows this

perfectly well and his own reply is not without a certain humour. "You are right in saying, 'I have no husband'; for you have had five husbands, and he whom you now have is not your husband; this you said truly." It does not demand much speculation to imagine that the woman was totally taken aback by this revelation; rather as anybody would be when confronted by a complete stranger who is well-informed as to the details of one's personal life. However, John's treatment of this disclosure shows the dramatic effect it has on her. Her level of consciousness is raised. Previously she had taken all that Jesus said at a simple, literal level. This might be understandable at the psychological level, but at the theological level we are being told that her state of life was, in the terminology the gospel applies to those who do not understand Jesus, 'from below'.

The gospel is shot through with this dualistic understanding of Jesus who is from above. The metaphors woven into this fundamental theme revolve around images of light and dark, flesh and spirit. The woman is in a similar position to Nicodemus who first 'came to him by night'. Nicodemus also took Jesus literally when told that he must be born again, or as the word *anōthen* can also be translated, 'from above'. Nicodemus's question was "How can a man return again to his mother's womb?" The Samaritan woman must learn how to see too. Her level of consciousness must be raised to a higher plain. The first steps in this direction are taken when she remarks: "Sir, I perceive that you are a prophet." Her mind once raised she moves away from the 'earthly' and by a process of lateral thinking she too changes tack. She starts to talk about worship; something not directly connected to the living water or to the question about her husband. It is the power of Jesus and his presence and his acceptance that produces the change in her. It is very unlikely that she could have ended the encounter at this point, even had she wanted to.

It is precisely at this point that she remembers that she is a Samaritan talking to a Jew; her religious sensibilities are aroused as well as the need to defend her own position. She therefore reminds Jesus that her ancestors worshipped on this mountain, that is Mount Gerizim. One of the many differences between Jews and Samaritans was that concerning the proper place for worship. According to the Jewish historian Josephus, the Samaritans had constructed a temple to the Lord on Mount Gerizim in 4 B.C. This was seen as a counter-type to the Temple in Jerusalem and was a constant source of scandal and antagonism to the Jerusalem clergy. The woman raises this matter by saying to Jesus: "Our fathers worshipped on this mountain, but you say that in Jerusalem is the place where men ought to worship." Jesus faces

her directly since they have moved into the same frame of dialogue and can now communicate at a different level. The woman is open to listening and to understanding what Jesus is saying to her. He answers: "The hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father...But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for such the Father seeks to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth." At this point the woman's level of consciousness is raised still further. She says to him: "I know that Messiah is coming (he who is called Christ); when he comes, he will show us all things." Jesus said to her, "I who speak to you am he." Notice here the emphasis on "I Am", *ego eimi*. This part of the dialogue concludes with an 'I Am' saying. It brings to mind the pre-eminent 'I AM' saying in the book of Exodus when God speaks to Moses from the heart of the fire in the burning bush. It also echoes other 'I AM' sayings in John's gospel: the Good Shepherd, the Bread of Life and the Vine, a self-designation of Jesus which is peculiar to the gospel of John.

There is a sequel to all of this of the most profound irony. The disciples returned and were shocked to see him having a conversation with a woman. Raymond Brown makes an interesting comment on this, finding it strange that they are more shocked to find him talking to a woman than that this woman also happened to be a Samaritan. However, the disciples did not have the courage to question him about it, but began to urge him to eat. They had brought back food and naturally supposed that Jesus, having had nothing to eat, would be hungry. But, Jesus replied to them, "I have food of which you know nothing." So the disciples said to one another, "Has anyone brought him food?" This provides the opening for Jesus to explain to them about the food that comes from doing the will of his Father who sent him. Again, there is a profound irony since the disciples have made exactly the same mistake as the woman had with regard to the water. They too are still understanding 'from below'. They are still on an 'earthly plane'. The following verses have Jesus explaining to them the nature of the food he has to eat in very much the same way that he had to explain to the woman the nature of the water he would have given her to drink.

Meanwhile, the woman has left her 'useless' water jar and has gone off to the town where she tells the people, "Come, see a man who told me all that I ever did. Can this be the Christ?" In response to this invitation they set out from the town to meet him. Reading that verse carefully, I wonder what reply those who think that women do not have a share in the missionary activity of preaching would make to it? Surely, it was her word that brought the townsfolk to Jesus. Admittedly, she did

not know what she was doing. Especially since her notion of a Messiah would not quite carry the same understanding as that of the Jews. The prophet who would return would be a prophet like the Moses of Deuteronomy 18:15. The prophet, or *tahib*, which means teacher, would come to unfold the full meaning of the five books of the Pentateuch, the only books accepted by the Samaritans as canonical scripture. However, her imperfect understanding was no bar to her belief. Neither did it obstruct those Samaritans who came to seek Jesus and who begged him to remain with them. Jesus stayed for two days, and through his word many came to faith. As they said to the woman, "It is no longer because of your words that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is indeed the Saviour of the world." So the final part of the story establishes that faith can only come through Jesus himself. An encounter with Jesus is necessary. Faith came to the Samaritans when they 'encountered' Jesus, just as it had to the woman when she 'encountered' him by the well.

We hear no more of the woman once her task is performed. We hear no more of the woman once her task is performed. We hear no more of her and we do not know whether she ever fully understood. However, we have seen how the evangelist uses this story to bring to light his own theological understanding of Jesus and how the post-resurrection community will relate to it in the Church of the future. Brown reminds us in his commentary that the term 'Saviour' was a common post-resurrection title for Jesus, particularly in the Lucan and Pauline works, but this is the only instance in the gospels of its being applied to Jesus during his public ministry. Two main themes course through the story under discussion: Living Water and Truth. Before investigating these further we should look at a passage in John which expresses the very heart of the Johannine Jesus, and without which the meaning of Jesus and the profundity of his teaching in the dialogue with the Samaritan woman might not be understood as it should.

In John 2:13-22 we are told the story of the cleansing of the Temple. Unlike the synoptic accounts of this episode, which place it later in the ministry of Jesus, John puts it right at the beginning of the ministry. One of the generally accepted reasons for this is that John makes the raising of Lazarus the occasion for the conspiracy of the Jews against Jesus. In the synoptic gospels it is the cleansing of the Temple that prompts the leaders of the people to determine to kill Jesus. However, there are further differences in the treatment of this episode. In response to the people's request for a sign, since they had failed to realise that the cleansing itself was a prophetic sign, Jesus replied, "Destroy this Temple and in three days I will raise it up." Like the woman, like

Nicodemus, they misunderstood and took him literally. The building of the Temple has continued for forty-six years and yet he was going to raise it in three days? The next verse, John 2:21, has a parenthetical aside, "But he spoke of the temple of his body." If this means anything at all in the understanding of John, then Jesus is identifying his body as the new temple which he will raise up in three days. It is worth noting that, whilst the gospels and the epistles talk of God's raising Jesus from the dead, this time the power of Jesus to raise himself is identified with the power of God. His disciples recalled the words of scripture "Zeal for your house will consume me." In other words this zeal will bring about his death. Jesus is the new temple, the tabernacle of God, who, as it says in the Prologue to John's gospel: "pitched his tent amongst us." From the new temple, which is the resurrected Jesus, will flow fountains of living water; through the risen Jesus glorified on the cross, the tabernacle of God, it will be possible to worship the Father in spirit and in truth. So, when the Samaritan woman faced Jesus this is the 'gift' of God she was offered. Jacob's well becomes the basis for the symbolism in which Jesus proves to be greater than Jacob. It is Jesus the gift of God who is the source of living water and that notion leads to the first great Christological insight of the passage. Jesus is greater than Jacob, just as he is greater than Abraham. Jesus is the true revelation of God.

What, we might ask, does this passage say to us today? Firstly, that God is Spirit, and that Spirit and truth are one and the same thing; to receive the Spirit and to live by it is to hear God's revelation and therefore to live in truth. It has nothing to do with a purely private and individual worship which does not need structures or the essentials of religious practice. What the woman was told was that both Jerusalem and Gerizim had been left behind because they were outmoded. What replaces Jerusalem and Gerizim is Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh, truly God and truly man, who is between heaven and earth, the true mediator between God and humanity. Through him all true worship will be directed in the Spirit to the Father. It will be truly Trinitarian.

God is Spirit, which means that we cannot see him. We have no direct knowledge of his essence, but he spoke the 'word'. This word is a living word which brings what it utters into being. The word which is Jesus is the spoken word of God through whom we can know that same God in spirit and in all truth. C.K. Barrett in his *Essays on John* writes,

This is indeed the message of the gospel. The whole truth about the invisible and unknown God is declared in the historical figure to which John points in his not literally historical narrative. The figure of Jesus does not (so John often declares) make sense when viewed as a national leader, a rabbi. He makes sense when in hearing him

you hear the Father, in looking at him you see the Father and worship him.³

This is surely the vision offered as a gift to the woman, and the vision and the gift that is offered to us in the shape of the living water of revelation and the spirit and truth of the worship of God.

Finally, I want to look briefly at the appearance of Jesus to another woman in John: Mary Magdalene in the account in John 20:11-18. Not much is known of Mary Magdalene, although she is often connected with the notorious woman who anointed Jesus and who is described in Luke's gospel as a 'woman of the city'. She is often cited as a sinner and even a prostitute to whom much has been forgiven because she loved much. The connection of this woman with Mary Magdalene is very tenuous. I am inclined to believe, along with Benedicta Ward and others, that they are not the same woman.⁴ What we do know about her, however, is that together with the mother of Jesus and Mary, the wife of Cleopas, she was present near the cross of Jesus. For John she was a witness to the crucifixion. As for the epithet, 'woman of the city', this might mean anything. It could be that some of the women who followed Jesus might have behaved in very unconventional ways and might have gained reputations simply for this association and not necessarily for having lived immoral lives.

In John 20: 11 Mary Magdalene stands outside the tomb weeping after looking into the tomb and realising that the body is not there. There then follows the traditional appearance of angels who ask her why she is weeping. She believes that the body has been taken away and hidden. The angels do not announce the resurrection to her. Then, turning round, Mary catches sight of Jesus, but does not recognise him and thinks that he is the gardener. She asks him to tell her what has happened to the body of Jesus, and, if he is the one who has carried it away, to tell her where he has laid it. The theme of non-recognition of Jesus is common in the post-resurrection stories. In the famous Lucan account of the Emmaus episode, the disciples did not recognise Jesus until their journey was finished and he engaged in a familiar gesture—the breaking of bread—through which they knew him. There is a certain consistency here because in John faith comes through seeing and hearing, but it can only come through Jesus who leads to the Father. It is in the Spirit given through Jesus that we come to know the truth of who he is. This was the case with the disciples at Emmaus, with Thomas in another episode in John and now with Mary Magdalene.

Are we to conclude that in her addressing Jesus as 'Rabbi' that Mary did not even then understand the meaning of the appearance

completely, since she chose this form of address often used of him in his public ministry? It is, of course, a similar kind of address as used by the Samaritan woman. But Jesus is more than a rabbi and more than a prophet, he is the risen Lord. It is not without significance that Jesus addresses her by name, "Mine know me and I know them." The voice of the Word brings with it seeing through the Spirit and truth, the truth of who Jesus is. This seems to be the experience Mary is undergoing in the garden when confronted by the risen Jesus.

When she recognised Jesus, Mary must have impulsively embraced him and been unwilling to let him go. This seems to fit in well with the matter of imperfect understanding. Jesus then says to her "Do not hold me, for I have not yet ascended to my Father; but go to my brethren and say to them, I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God". Mary then goes off and tells the disciples, "I have seen the Lord". She has finally seen and understood and proclaimed the resurrection to others. There are several interesting things about this passage which are vital to an understanding of the sequence and to the theology of John.

Firstly, Mary clings to him, prompting Jesus to rebuke her because what she is doing is inappropriate. It is a response which is no longer compatible with his form of glorified, resurrected existence. He will be present in future to his Church through his disciples, as the giver of the Spirit which is the source of worship in Spirit and in truth. He speaks of "My father and your father." The disciples are referred to as the brothers of Jesus. Mary Magdalene is then their sister. Here we have a post-resurrectional statement about the new family of Jesus which is the Church. Jesus calls God his Father and we are his brothers and sisters. We are reminded of the fact that Jesus has told us that he will not leave us orphans, but he will send a 'comforter', a paraclete, who will not speak of himself but of all things that he has taught his disciples. We are reminded too that this cannot happen until the Son of Man ascends. There in the garden Mary Magdalene experiences an encounter which enables her to proclaim the risen Christ to the disciples.

It is of further interest that Brown interprets the dialogue between Jesus and John and his mother beneath the cross in a similar way. In Brown's view, when Jesus hands his mother over to John, so he becomes her son, and in turn Mary is handed to John as his mother. Jesus is pointing at that solemn moment to the new family of the Church.⁵ The new family that transcends human ties of blood is a theme found in the synoptic gospels as well as in John. We only need to recall the number of occasions when Jesus emphasises that the relationship to him which is 'salvation', is the relationship of discipleship. He himself

asks the question, "Who are members of my family?" Those who hear the word of God and keep it qualify to share in this relationship. This is strongly emphasised when we are told in the gospels that the relations of Jesus did not believe in him and indeed might have thought him to be deranged. What brings us to this discipleship as members of the family of God is the Spirit and therefore the truth of the revelation of Christ made flesh, light from light, true God from true God, only begotten of the Father, full of Grace and Truth. What is only imperfectly understood by the woman at the well before the resurrection is fully understood by Mary Magdalene in 'the garden', the traditional paradigmatic understanding of paradise.

- 1 *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary* (London, 1989) pp. 943–50.
- 2 Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel of John* (London, 1971) pp. 169–85.
- 3 C.K. Barrett, *Essays on John* (London, 1982) p. 16.
- 4 Benedicta Ward SLG, *Harlots of The Desert* (London, 1987) pp. 10–25.
- 5 Brown, *op. cit* pp. 967–1051.

Eric Rohmer on Nature *and* Grace

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It is a rare thing to find a film like *A Winter's Tale*, the latest work of Eric Rohmer, in which the protagonists talk about the knowledge of God and the leap of faith, and discuss reincarnation, abortion—to refute it—; invoke the theory of reminiscence; where they go into churches to pray, and in which the heroine thinks her partner ought to go to Mass, because it is Sunday and he is a believer. I should probably make it clear at the outset that this film was neither solicited nor financed by religious authorities, but was created by a film-writer who, while making no mystery of his Catholicism, has never paraded it.

Return to the Sources

A Winter's Tale is a masterpiece of subtlety, of precision in dialogue and photography. It handles people and situations with understanding, and even if the people happen to talk about Pascal and Plotinus, there is never a sense of that heaviness which is sometimes discernible in Rohmer's previous film, *A Summer's Tale*, where references to Kant were a little ponderous at times. . . . The setting remains simple and