

A Samaritan woman

John 4:5-30

"Good news happens in unexpected places and often in chance encounters."ⁱ

In my year of travels I went to a school assembly in a Highland village. It wasn't part of the official schedule but one of the organisers had a daughter who lived in the village who had asked if I would visit the Primary School where she taught. Ross-shire isn't all bucolic farmland and heathery hills. There are areas and communities where there is real social and economic deprivation, in the countryside and in the villages and towns.

We had to leave at some very early hour to get to the village. "No one famous has ever come to visit us," the teacher said. I was beginning to feel better already. The whole school was being assembled, maybe around one hundred children from 5 year olds to 12 year olds. Some were delightful; some looked like they were going to be a rough crowd who weren't going to take any prisoners.

I ad-libbed my talk, but sensed that, really, they wanted to ask questions. I can tell you it made BBC's Question Time look like a walk in the park. At the end of my bit of the assembly the teachers were going to award gold certificates for good behaviour, good results and so on. "But today," they said, "We've just got one gold certificate." There had been a fire in the village earlier in the week, and a family, who had recently been moved in as a last resort because of their anti-social behaviour, had been burned out of their home. Amongst the family, none present at school that day, were some children.

One of the little boys in school, who I was told was often in trouble, sometimes serious, had decided he was going to do something to help. Whilst adults in the community had got together

clothes, carpets, furniture, food; this little boy had collected second hand toys, as well as sweets and soft drinks for the children of the family. All on his own, he went from house to house and filled a sack.

Everyone cheered at the assembly when he got his gold certificate, his first ever in all his years at school. As I handed it over to him, I also gave him one of those little Bethlehem olive wood stars, because he was indeed a star in everyone's eyes.

But he had something from me. Again, unplanned.

"You've come all the way from Edinburgh to see us, and I didn't know I was going to get to speak to you. But here, take this for the road home. It's a long way back, and you'll get thirsty." And he handed me a little plastic bottle of Irn Bru.

I'd gone, unexpectedly, to a little school in the back of the beyond, to do all usual ministerial and moderator things, and maybe tell them a bit about the Good News. It's my job. But there, Good News found me in the gift of something to drink from a little boy who had been a hero for the day, and who I heard about recently still has that little wooden star, the only thing he thought somebody famous would ever give him.

Good News happens in unexpected places. I have two friends who, with others, have driven an ambulance from London to Ukraine. They are bringing much needed medical aid and other things hard to find. But in fact what they're finding is they're the ones who are being ministered to with kindness, hospitality and love, and reassurance that when the sirens go off as a warning to incoming Russian missiles, there's still time for a coffee and a pastry. Good news happens in unexpected places.

So it was for the Samaritan woman by a well, and Jesus of Nazareth, travelling well off the beaten track and into territory belonging to the Jews' traditional enemies, the Samaritans.

She, nameless, out in the heat of the day at noon, probably to avoid the criticism and accusations made by others because of her eventful relationship background, if I can put that subtly. She's a nobody, a bit like that Emily Dickinson poem:

*I'm Nobody! Who are you?
Are you - Nobody - too?
Then there's a pair of us!
Dont tell! they'd advertise - you know!*

*How dreary - to be - Somebody!
How public - like a Frog -
To tell one's name - the livelong June -
To an admiring Bog!*

But she wasn't a nobody to Jesus. Jesus, weary after His journey, His disciples off in town looking for food, sits by the well, and the scene is set.

To whom does the good news come? To Jesus, thirsty, looking for someone to provide a bucket so He could reach the water, asks her to give Him a drink. She, astonished a Jewish man should speak to her in the first place, realises that all sorts of gender, social and religious taboos were being broken. The Bible passage doesn't tell us if Jesus ever got a drink of water. I rather hope He did. But what takes place is a gospel conversation, a conversation about good news, in that unexpected place.

She, the nameless Samaritan woman, is drawn into a faith conversation. About gifts from God, and living water, and eternal life. He includes her. He offers to her, a non-Jew, a woman of bad repute, the gift of living water. He notices her; He speaks to her, and keeps speaking to her until, eventually there are the glimmerings of understanding about what He is talking about. He is unafraid to engage with this fragile, broken woman. Somehow, He knows something about the depth of her negative self-image. He does not judge her or condemn her.

We would have expected Him to be the One to be the One Who will meet her needs, or sort her out, but He comes to her as One Who is thirsty, and in the recognition that she might meet His need for water, she is put in the position of helper and provider, and not the other way around.

Like a little boy handing a Moderator a plastic bottle of Irn Bru. Like attacked and bombed and brutalised Ukrainians offering welcome and shelter and support to people who have come to bring *them* help. Good news comes in unexpected places, and from unexpected people.

There's something beautiful in the Bible story from John's gospel. Jesus is thirsty at the well, and we are the ones with the bucket. Can a little thing like a cup of cool water, offered in love, be the beginning of a salvation journey? Yes, and we will never know until we meet the stranger and tend to the human need first.ⁱⁱ

It is in the meeting of needs, the needs of Jesus, the unrecognised but now revealed Messiah, the thirsty One; it is in the needs of the Samaritan woman, for recognition, welcome, hope, that the Christian faith finds a major reason for existing. It is in the asking and giving and receiving that we discover not only the infinite qualities and wonder of other human beings, but the infinite qualities and wonder of the Saviour of the World.

In newly ordained elders, with gifts and talents offered to our Church. In Sunday Club leaders, and church musicians, and caretakers and administrators and church officers; in coffee servers and dance leaders; in dementia carers and social event organisers; in charity workers and fund-raisers; in children, women and men of all ages here and online. In all of these people, the unexpected and the expected lives of good news, Jesus makes His presence known and felt and encountered and understood today.

Good news comes in unexpected places, and from unexpected people.

The Samaritan woman, an early evangelist, going to tell people about the Man Who knew everything she ever did, and that's saying something, and loved her anyway; and then 'Come and see...' See for yourselves, and people went, and saw, and listened. Jesus stayed two days with them. And the Samaritan woman was saved, and I wonder how many others.

All because of a thirsty Messiah, and a woman coming to a well with a bucket. People encountered Jesus in the meeting of needs, and encounter the Saviour of the World, the only time the word, 'Saviour' is used in John's Gospel.

The Samaritan woman, an outsider, who becomes a witness to faith. She starts as a beginner in faith and becomes an apostle sent by Jesus Himself to tell others about Who He is. A model for women, a model for men, for anyone who thinks they're nobodies. Everybody is somebody. Anyone can share the faith.. Good news comes in unexpected places, and from unexpected people. Even you and me

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit

Amen

ⁱ Thomas W Walker, Feasting on the Gospels, John Vol 1, p92

ⁱⁱ Anna Carter Florence, Feasting on the Word, Year A, Vol 2, p91