

Video

This morning we continue in our sermon series about what it means to be a 'contagious Christian' – a Christian who introduces other people to Jesus.

As you will know we have a vision as a church to see 100 new Christians come to faith in the next year. And the question is asked 'Yes, but how?' How is that going to happen?

Well, the good news is – plans the church has e.g messy church but also and mainly- through you and me.

100 Christians is broadly one each. Two weeks ago those of us who were in the service wrote down on post-its the names of people we know who we would like to see become Christians. There were about 100 names on the board. Not only do we know who the 100 people might be – we even know their names! How cool is that?

Someone I know once spoke of the 'invisible church'. The '**visible** church' is all the people sat here and others who aren't here today - who make up the church now. The **invisible** church are those people we know who we're praying for and who we would like to be part of the church. Maybe they are the people who God knows will be part of the church in the future. They just don't know it yet. So I'd like to be bold and suggest that perhaps these are the names of our invisible church.

And as Romans 10:14 says *“How can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone telling them?”*

How many people here came to faith because someone – a friend, relative - told you about Jesus and shared their faith with you?

Being a contagious Christian is about relationship. Perhaps God will use us in bringing the people we know to know Jesus.

But it's a bit weird isn't it? I'm not an evangelist. What will my friends think of me? How do I talk about my faith in Christ without sounding like a nerd? Good questions.

That's what I'd like us to explore together this morning. And as a model for talking with people about faith matters we're going to use the example of – Jesus!

Specifically Jesus and his conversation with a woman whom he met at the side of a well as she was getting water. Jesus and the woman were strangers – at least she thought so – so in some ways it's a different to us, because mostly we will be talking about spiritual things with people we do know. But that being said I still think there is a lot we can learn from the way Jesus encounters this woman in a deep and profound way.

Jesus at the well of Jacob at Sychar in Samaria– in the north of Israel. The Samaritans were Jewish but had intermarried with

Assyrians, which wasn't a good thing for a good Jew to do. Instead of worshipping in Jerusalem at the Temple they worshipped on their own mountain – Mount Gerizim. There are still Samaritans today. There are about 1,000 of them who worship still on Mount Gerizim.

In Jesus time Jewish people looked down on Samaritans - but Jesus didn't, as his story of the Good Samaritan showed. He traveled extensively through Samaria in his ministry.

So Jesus sits down to take a rest at a well, while his disciples go off to the nearest Co-op or whatever to buy some lunch.

1. Jesus was at the well

The well was (and still is, in many parts of the world today), the center of the community's life. It was the place where people got water but also the place they came to gossip, or as us women call it 'share information'. Especially for the women it was an important social place – where you went to catch up with who was doing what with whom and what the news on the street was. It was a place of informal education and community life.

Where is the well for you? Where is the place of meeting for you? Where are the places where you know you'll bump into people and chat and chew the fat? For me it's probably the school playground at pick up time. For you it may be the golf club on a Saturday evening, or the gym, or the staff room or wherever.

If we are to be contagious Christians perhaps we need to be quite

deliberate about where we go and when, so that we will meet people and be in a place to talk about faith with them. Maybe we need to make an effort to go to 'the well' open to what God might want to do. There is someone in this church who I know goes to the same coffee shop at the same time each week and it's starting to be a 'well' for her, as she gets to know people there and begins to talk about faith with them.

Because it's no good being an evangelist if we have no one to talk to. As someone once said, "I have a real heart for the lost. I just don't know any!". Well perhaps the well is the place to go to get to know.

2. Jesus takes the initiative

So Jesus is at the well, at the 6th hour - 12 midday - when it was really hot. People usually came to the well at morning and evening when it was cooler. But here is this woman getting water in the middle of the day. Why? Maybe she wanted to be alone. She had a chequered history and she probably didn't want to be part of the 'information shraing' of the other women - especially when she was the subject of the gossip!

And Jesus is sitting at the well. That means that as she stoops to draw water, he is at eye-level with her as he asks her for a drink. "*Woman, give me a drink*".

This was a risky thing to do. First, because Jews didn't generally speak to Samaritans. And second because he, a man, spoke to a woman who was not a relative. The woman points out his faux pas

to him: "*You are Jew and I am a Samaritan woman.*" Are you quite mad? But Jesus considers her salvation more important than his reputation.

Sometimes perhaps we need to take the initiative in conversations about faith. And in today's secular climate that will very often feel like a risky thing to be doing. What will they think? Will I fall flat on my face? It's not 'done' to talk about religion, is it? We're British after all.

Sometimes I hope people will *just notice* I'm a Christian and strike up a conversation with me about it. Then I don't have to be the one to make the first move: "*Jesus I pray that you will so shine out of me that the people I meet will notice and ask me what is different about me*". Now of course we should radiate the light of Christ through our words and actions but – and I have to be honest here – it doesn't happen very often that someone comes up to me in a shop and says – "*Excuse me I hope you don't mind me asking, but I notice by the way you hold that marmalade that there is something different about you. Are you by any chance a Christian and would you like to share your testimony with me?*"

I know it does happen sometimes. I know friends who are in business who conduct their working lives in such a way that people do notice and ask.

But - here's the point I'm getting at – I think sometimes we have to step out and make the first steps toward conversations about God, as Jesus did, even if that breaks some social taboos and feels

risky.

How did he do it?

3. Jesus made a link with ordinary things

Well actually he said something very normal to begin with: “*Give me a drink*’. That’s OK. They’re there by a well. She has a bucket, he doesn’t. It’s hot. “Please can I have a drink?”. Perfectly natural. He begins with what is normal and everyday and from there makes links into the world of faith “*if you knew the gift of God 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*’. Clever!

I wonder what ‘God-links’ can we make into the everyday lives of people we meet. Not in a naff way! But just as part of who we are and what we talk about.

As we talk about things we do with our time, do we admit that we go to church, or read the Bible? As we talk about the struggles we have with children’s behavior or work issues do we tell people that we might pray about it? I met someone the other day who told me the struggles she’s going through. And I offered to pray for her. Perhaps it’s just about keeping or our faith in Jesus and the activities that go with it, right out there in the open, rather than hiding them away in a box we’re embarrassed by marked ‘religious stuff’.

I remember all through my teenage years that I really didn’t want my friends to know I was a Christian. It really is tough for

teenagers at school – if they can do this stuff, any of us can. And I spent much time and energy carefully disguising my Christian life. I didn't tell them I'd been on a church weekend away – I just went 'away with friends'. And I didn't tell them I'd been to a youth camp – it was just camping. And I regret that now, because who knows what would have happened in their lives if I'd fessed up?

4. Jesus engages with her in robust, honest debate

Anyway, Jesus offers the woman living water and, she begins to really get into the conversation now. She's quite a feisty woman. She reminds him that this is Jacob's well. She is not going to let Jesus think that her faith was lesser than the Jewish his. She gives as good as she gets.

And that's great. Jesus isn't phased by her 'partial faith. He doesn't condemn her for her lack of understanding. He really engages with her about worship and doctrine and theology. He affirms what she already knows and gently leads her into truth about what she doesn't. He doesn't "throw the Bible at her" or coerce her faith. He allows her to explore. He questions her and listens to her answers.

Some of the best conversations I ever had about faith were with a Muslim woman who I shared a study with when I was studying for my PhD in Birmingham. She was from Egypt and was called Ghada. And we really discussed who Jesus was – what the differences between what she believed and what I did. And it got quite heated sometimes. But we were friends and it was OK. I didn't convert her and she didn't convert me – but it was really good to talk honestly with her.

Sometimes I wonder if we fear that talking honestly about faith our friends will turn off – and of course that may be the case, but many people do already have an opinion about what faith is and will willingly talk about it if we're not afraid of robust conversation.

Jesus presents the truth to the woman bit by bit, in response to what she says to him. I think sometimes there is the temptation when an opportunity opens up in a conversation to dump everything we think we should say about Christianity all at once - because it might be my only chance!! If we do that, it is likely to be our only chance!

What Jesus does is to open a space for dialogue, where in complete trust, both Jesus and the woman are transformed.

5. Jesus knows and values the woman

Eventually Jesus decides to cut to the chase and he changes track: *He told her, "Go, call your husband and come back." "I have no husband," she replied. Jesus said to her, "You are right when you say you have no husband. The fact is, you have had five husbands, and the man you now have is not your husband. What you have just said is quite true."*

That was a bit of a bolt from the blue. In Jewish law women could remarry twice. She seems to have done twice several times. She's on her sixth man. Now we know little of her life and history and it may not have been her 'fault'. She may have been widowed five times or, quite possibly, had been divorced by five husbands.

Whatever had happened to her was unlikely to have been her choice.

Jesus doesn't reject, or judge, or blame the woman for her situation. Instead he praises her for telling the truth. He knows her as a person and values her for who she is. "*You tell me about me*" the woman in the video said. *To know is to love.*

As we seek to become more contagious Christians, maybe we need to hold in mind that people are known and loved and valued by Jesus. They're not test cases for our evangelism. They're not targets. They are people we know and love and who we would like to introduce to our friend and savior. The motivation must always be love.

And finally ...

6. Jesus has insight into her life

"I see you are a prophet" she says to him. Jesus insight into the woman's situation is what opens the door for her. How does he know this stuff? He must be a prophet. So she tells her friends, *'Come and meet someone who told me everything I ever did'*.

He has a special gift of insight. Wouldn't you just love that gift of insight too? Being able to just know what is going on for people we meet in order to demonstrate God's knowledge of them and love for them? Well actually I do think that gift **is** available to us. The Holy Spirit **is** able to give us gifts of insight and discernment and knowledge that are beyond what we could naturally and humanly

know, so that people might be drawn to Jesus. It's a big topic and perhaps we could have some more teaching on it another day. But ask for this gift.

I have a friend who quite often has remarkable conversations with people based on what God reveals to him about them. He was prompted once in Debenhams to tell the woman at the check out that he would pray for her mother. She broke down in tears and asked him how he knew her mother had been diagnosed with cancer that day. We shouldn't be afraid to ask for the full resources of God's kingdom to be at our disposal as we talk with people. After all he knows them and loves them more than we ever could and longs for them to get close to Jesus.

Then Jesus declared, to the woman 'I am he, the one who is speaking to you'

And she knows in her spirit that he is.

And the woman runs off to tell her friends, in turn risking ridicule from her community for the sake of showing them Jesus. She must be pretty sure about the man she drags them out to see.

When we are known by Jesus and shown for who we are and loved and accepted and transformed, we can go and transform others in his strength in turn. That's what it means to be contagious.

Let's pray.

