

# From whom no secrets are hidden...

## Lent Three

Sunday 19<sup>th</sup> March 2017

John 4:5-42



Set in late 19<sup>th</sup> century in rural England, Thomas Hardy's powerful novel, Tess of the d'Urbervilles, tells the story of the eldest daughter of an impoverished peddler. At the age of sixteen Tess is forced to work on a local estate. The work is hard and as Tess goes about her tasks she catches the eye of the estate owner's son who subsequently pursues, seduces and eventually rapes her in the woods.

Tess falls pregnant and returns home with the shame of losing her virginity to give birth to a sickly boy. The child lives just a few weeks. On his last night of life, Tess baptises the baby herself because the family refuses to have the local parson come. The premise here is that one keeps such matters quiet. To maintain family honour the birth of an illegitimate child must be kept secret. The dead child is then clandestinely buried in the corner of local church yard reserved for unbaptised infants. Tess grieves the loss of her little boy painfully and silently.

Some years later Tess meets and marries the man of her dreams. Convinced this is genuine love, Tess shares her secret - only to be rejected by her husband and forced into a life of dependence on the manipulations and exploits of other men. Tess' life ends tragically in the gallows after she murders a man who continues to exploit and abuse her.

I probably do not do justice to Thomas Hardy's complex work. But the point is that this young peasant woman is vulnerable, not only to the predatory actions of those men around her, but also to prevailing attitudes and assumptions that lay the blame on Tess and create a sense of shame that is both denigrating and demeaning.



Understandings of “shame” derive from a sense of “covering up”, of a preoccupation about how we “appear” to others and to ourselves. Shame leads to a sense of not feeling good enough, of being inadequate, of not so much doing something wrong as feeling there is basically something wrong with us.

In Tess’s case the loss of her virginity and the consequences that had for a vulnerable, peasant girl in 19th century England led to a sense of shame, even though the wrongdoing laid squarely with the one who pursued and abused her.

Shame impacts on us all. Listen to the story of a contemporary woman as she reflects after being pursued by a predatory male:

*“Like most kids I was consumed with guilt. This was my fault, I thought, though I simply could not understand why.*

*Feeling responsible, I told no-one. Not my parents. Not my friends. Not a counsellor. No-one. For almost 20 years. It was though a seed of terror had been buried deep within me, and at the time I had no idea how it would affect me in the future.*

*I came to tell myself a horrifying story about what I was: a loser, a weakling, a less than. I had fallen prey to what is known as self-verification theory which posits that we often want to be understood by others according to how we see ourselves; the stories we tell about ourselves. We become one with our stories, and they become interwoven with our identities.*

*Abuse leads to many damaging responses, but the most ubiquitous response is hiding - hiding in shame. Over the years, I came to understand that the incident was really an experience of violation and shame; except in this case, the shame was personified. It was like being stabbed with a knife of emptiness, and feeling like being stabbed was something I deserved.*

Friends, this morning Jesus encounters a woman who hides a secret, a person for whom shame is all too familiar. It’s an incredible story as Jesus journeys through alien country. Samaria lies in the hill country between Galilee and Jerusalem. It was occupied by people who an anathema to the Jews.

For these people were seen to have compromised their faith and thereby polluted their inheritance as God’s people. They were considered to be “lesser-beings”.

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But there is more to the story. Jesus converses one-to-one with a woman who is, in effect, seen as a “lesser-being” among “lesser-beings.” This is a woman who was side-lined in her community. She was ostracised as she could obviously not socialise or participate in general village life. Women normally gathered at the well in the morning or the evening. Here it’s high noon, a time when no-one really chooses to gather or draw water.

And we learn more. This woman has had five husbands and the relationship this Samaritan woman is now in is one outside of wedlock. With this in mind some interpretations of the story have placed this woman in the category of a harlot, and adulteress or a prostitute. But I believe they are wrong.

For you see, in Jesus’ time women had few, if any rights. Husbands could initiate divorce virtually with the stroke of a pen. That is why Jesus makes the point so strongly against divorce in the Gospels of Matthew and Mark.

Here Jesus’ opposition to divorce is a means to protect women. For you see, on divorce a woman was left completely vulnerable with no economic security and a very questionable reputation within the community. This Samaritan woman had been through five divorces meaning she had been rejected, most likely exploited, and even abused - five times!



Modern day stories from Palestine tell a similar story.

At the age of 15 Sanaa was pursued by a relatively well-off older man who requested her hand in marriage. Seeing the possibility of some economic security and perhaps even some social prestige, Sanaa’s father agreed. The marriage took place. However, Sanaa’s husband soon became involved in a relationship with another young girl. Then, not long into the marriage, Sanaa’s husband started to beat her. In less than a year Sanaa was dumped.

And it was Sanaa who bore all the shame. Her father laid the blame for this failed marriage clearly before her. Divorced women bring forth a bad reputation upon the family. In some extreme cases honour killings can take place where the woman in question is executed.

The business of needing to “cover up”, the threat of being ostracised or condemned because of the activities, the pressures or, indeed, the sins of others leads to, perhaps, the biggest lies people ever have to live with today.

Psychologists and counsellors claim there are many people today who, because of shame, carry a deep sense of stress, fear, exploitation and betrayal.

A relationship that fails, issues with parenting or disputes that draw us in may leave us with a sense of inadequacy, personal failure, inferiority or indeed, shame. When things do not go the way our community expects them to - or when issues arise that do not measure up with what society demands - then there is a real sense we are somehow defective, that we have failed.

I find this among many introverts. Indeed, introverts tend to let our worries weigh heavily on our shoulders. We bare the blame. We feed on the idea that we are less than other people. We believe we should be doing a whole lot of things. And if we don't then we are failing. So things like "I should try harder, I should be more grateful, I should give more, I should be nicer" - all enter our vocabulary, often in a destructive way.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, with all these things in mind, there is Good News this morning! Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman results in a number of significant things.

Firstly, Jesus' engagement with the Samaritan woman offers a space for her to share the truths she is hiding. Jesus' meeting with this woman enables her to lift the cover and speak what the community at large either forces her to cover up or makes her simply keep quiet about.

Listen to the dialogue here:

*Jesus says to her. "Go, call your husband, and come back." The woman answered him, "I have no husband." Jesus said to her, "You are right in saying, "I have no husband"; for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!"*

Friends, Jesus cuts through the spin. Jesus sees right through the hogwash that the community of his day perpetuates - to get to the point. And in doing so he enables the Samaritan woman to name what is going on.

In the excellent film, Spotlight - a movie about the Boston Globe's reporting on church abuse scandals - there is a powerful scene where one of the victim's lawyers admits to the Globe staff that many of the earliest victims received pathetic settlements from their abusers. But then he goes on to say something remarkable:

*"All - most of them wanted was some acknowledgement of what had happened."*

People wanted acknowledgement. They didn't want money or retribution. They wanted the truth to be recognised and told! The issues had to be named - and in naming - people were listened to. No longer was the truth covered up!

And you know, this is what many indigenous people yearn for here in Australia. They don't want money or retribution. Rather, they yearn for acknowledgement - acknowledgement that the arrival of European society in this land had a devastating impact on their society.

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Aboriginal people long for acknowledgement that European settlement of the land upon which we live left many of them decimated.

Secondly, Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan women evokes a response. Note, that after her encounter with Jesus, the woman returns to her village where she makes a bold, public declaration about Jesus.

She is no longer a shadow in the background. She is no longer an invisible entity hiding in places where no-one gathers. She is no longer a despised outsider seeking to apologise for what had been done to her. Indeed, she is no longer a victim who is forced to live with consequences of what others have inflicted upon her.

Rather, the Samaritan woman is a person who can see the significance of who Jesus is. The Samaritan woman is a person who is, therefore, free to declare who she really is because, in her encounter with Jesus, she has been recognised, she has been acknowledged, she has been valued and she has been truly loved and empowered.



Now, I am not offering easy answers here. The Samaritan woman's sense of shame, our sense of shame - things that bind us up and tell us we are either inferior or are somehow at fault, will not simply vanish.

But, in Christ, I believe there is hope.

An old Prayer of Preparation says: *"Almighty God, to whom all hearts are open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hidden: cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love you, and worthily magnify your holy name"*

This beautiful prayer reminds us that God knows our secrets. But more importantly, God understands our attempts to cover things up. God is more than aware of our moves to suppress those things that haunt us. God is alert to community attempts to lay the blame. God is conscious of those wrongs that have been imposed on us.



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And in this incredible story of the Samaritan woman at the well, Jesus proclaims there is a way forward!

Friends, the way forward is gifted to us in what Jesus declares as “Living Water.” This is water that brings forth life - but not just in a physical or a psychological way. This life has its source and its being in the Creator himself. It’s a life that says we are sons and daughters of God, it’s a life that announces we are made in the image of God, it’s a life that affirms not even death can blanket, extinguish or blot such things out.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, today there is no need to hide oneself in shame. There is no need to keep secrets from God. For, Jesus comes to lift the lids on our lives and to expose community efforts to suppress and to hide. Jesus comes to challenge all those powers that seek to demean us or rob us of our true humanity.

For in Christ, there is “Living Water”, there is truth and there is freedom!

Amen.



**John Barr**