

Bigotry. Text: John 4:1- 42 (The Woman at the Well)

Do we all think we could recognise bigotry? It seems Robert Kilroy-Silk's now infamous article went unrecognised (or unread?) when it first appeared in April 2003 but when it was republished in January 2004 ago he was immediately accused of being a bigot, and lost his contract with the BBC. Or are accusations of bigotry just precious protests from the politically-correct?

A bigot is someone who is intolerant of other people because of something they cannot change about themselves. None of us should tolerate liars, cheats, bullies or boasters. They have chosen to abuse their freewill at the expense of others. But is it the fault of Jeffrey John, the almost Bishop of Reading, that he is gay? Is it fair that Baroness Greenfield was blackballed as a Fellow of the Royal Society because she complained about the paucity of women in science? Was it young Stephen Lawrence's fault he was black when he was brutally murdered, and his case mishandled by the Police because he was just another inner-city statistic? Our society is riddled with bigotry.

Is Bigotry alive and well at Radley? Let us think. It can't be; we all remembered last Tuesday as Holocaust Remembrance Day, didn't we? Our stomachs would churn at the scenes witnessed by the Russian soldiers who liberated Auschwitz on 27th of January 1945. But what about bigotry in our own lives? We know it's wrong, but we've heard the sneers: he's a gay bastard; she's just some feminist bitch; they're Radville oiks.

We are called by Jesus to love our neighbour, but some of us are rather choosy about the neighbourhood in which we live.

We know the parable of the Good Samaritan so well. But what has the story about Jesus and the Samaritan Woman got to teach us?

Jesus was like us, surrounded by bigots; for 1st Century Jews, Samaritans were untouchable. They were considered a mongrel breed, whose bloodline and religious practices had been corrupted through intermarriage with Assyrians and Pagans. They worshipped in the wrong place, on Mount Gerazim rather than at Jerusalem, and in the wrong way despite following some of the Jewish scripture, law and traditions.

Jews would have no dealings with Samaritans. Indeed Matthew Chapter 10 relates that when Jesus gave the twelve disciples their first mission, he told them to proclaim the Gospel to the Lost Tribes of Israel before taking it to the Gentiles and Samaritans.

So when Jesus arrives tired at Jacob's Well, he turns his back on bigotry and, much to her surprise, addresses the Samaritan Woman: "Give me a drink". It is important to note that she does not resist his approach and turn away from him, although she must have been very surprised by his request. She would have known from his dress and manner of speech that he was a Jew, and Jews are not permitted to accept food from Samaritans as it would be ritually unclean.

But there is another reason for her surprise; She was a woman. Indeed, she was leading an immoral life, having been divorced by five husbands. Men did not walk with women in the streets. A Pharisee might even close his eyes if he saw a woman approaching. A man could divorce a woman if she was found talking familiarly with other men. This Samaritan woman had been divorced five times and the man she was currently with would not marry her, a fact of which she was clearly ashamed. Religious law forbade her returning to her former husbands, so she was thrown from one precarious relationship to another.

Jesus was not interested in preserving his reputation; how often did the religious authorities, and even his own disciples, accuse him of consorting with sinners and undesirables. He asks her if she will draw water from the well for him. She has to make a response, and it is positive. Jesus then reveals himself for the first time as the Messiah and offers her the Water of Life. Although she takes his offer literally at first, she eventually understands and returns to her town proclaiming the Gospel; "Come and see a man who has told me everything I ever did. Could this be the Messiah?"

Two thousand years later, we can still find ourselves trapped into believing we have nothing in common with people who are born different from ourselves because of their race, class, gender or sexuality. As Christians, we must accept people as they are. Jesus calls us to see him in one another. He promises that if we trust him and offer our lives in his service, he will give us Eternal Life. As we come to take our Communion, we should echo the Samaritan Woman's words; **"Lord, give me that water, and then I shall never be thirsty"**.