

ST AIDAN'S UNITING CHURCH

SUNDAY 14 JUNE 2009

Rev. Richard Golding

John 4: 5-42

"The Worshipful Place"

For me, a favourite place for meditation or a sense of worship is upon a mountain top. I'm in good company for many a time Jesus did that. There is peace, stillness, away from people and noise. And in the mind you feel you are closer to God. The solidness of the scenery, hill and valley, stretching out till distance takes it over the rim of the earth and stills our restless eyes. Sweet refreshing air fills our lungs and cleansed from the smog and tainted vapours, oxygen in full measure reinvigorates our intellect and our perceiving power.

The walk or drive to attain our place of solitude helps us distance ourselves from the work-a-day world, the cares and worries that inevitably beset us in our daily travels.

It was an interest to our family on weekend drives to see which church denomination gained a position on a hill. My father used to say that the Catholics usually got the best sites where church and steeple could be easily seen. The Songs of the Psalmist for the travellers going to Jerusalem to the Temple, built on Mount Zion, were called Songs of Ascent. I have been in some churches which have a large window at the front of the church looking out with a view of nature, a garden or towards a mountain, where a view of hill and valley can be seen. These places I have found most worshipful, peace inducing.

Jesus, in the reading this morning was seated beside Jacob's well at the foot of Mount Gerazim. Jacob had placed a cairn of rocks on top of the mountain and made a sacrifice to the Lord. The Samaritans had built a Temple there in the time of Manassah the King and saw it as superior to the Jerusalem Temple, but destroyed by John Hyrcanus two centuries before Christ.

Joseph was buried at the foot of this mountain and the well, over 1200 years old in Jesus' time, had served the people in time of drought. It was 100 foot deep, not a spring hut a seepage well, a 'still well', rather than a living or flowing well of water. John in the telling of this event gave it in the form of a sermon and dialogue that brought conversion to the hearers after they gained knowledge awareness and final belief. In form it was constructed with question and a reply which indicated misunderstanding. This allowed Jesus to add to his original statement.

Equally, the Samaritan woman was no fool. She knew her Samaritan history and faith beliefs and sought to counter some of Jesus' statements. Undeterred by her avoidance and misunderstanding, Jesus draws her to state the high point of the Samaritan's faith hopes, the 'future coming of the Messiah'. Jesus is able openly to state that he is that person.

The setting and dialogue here is a kind of worship out in the open. Instead of looking from a church through a window at a pastoral scene, it is a well beside a three-forked roadway, one of which leads to Shechem, the closest town.

Illustrations abound for the sermon. The water and its quality which could be stagnant, still, running and living. The bucket for drawing water that is thirst quenching; the area, still known for its climate, fields of corn and good soil giving more than one crop per year, seen waving in the breeze. The

woman's coming to Jesus and her departing and return with the village folk seen clearly by Jesus. Likewise, the disciples disappearing from sight and reappearing heard or unheard by Jesus but intuitively being aware of their own misunderstanding and concerns about his behaviour toward the woman.

Then, the grand finale, back into the worshipful scene comes all those affected by the words of Jesus and Jesus descriptively likens them to the harvest. When was your most worshipful time? Where was it? How did it feel? For me, one vividly remembered service was in the Lorne Church in Victoria on the front road facing the Ocean Surf. The preacher was the Rev. Lewis, an ex-Baptist minister of renown from the Collins St Baptist Church who, saddened by the churches withdrawal from the WCOC (World Council of Churches), resigned. He preached about the gifts King Solomon was given on his succession to the throne and the things that are really important to people.

A place – a Methodist Church I attended at a Youth Camp in the Dandenongs, with a picture window at the front of the church that framed the valley. It led me to ponder the greatness of the Lord, the creator, and the beauty of his creation as I viewed the scene in worship.

As for feelings, they are many and varied. Some are brought about by the eloquence and beauty of words that construct a mental picture, where the mind chooses not to wander, rather seeking to drink in all the words that are uttered. Other times it is a peace or relief at past failure forgiven and addressed. Or it is of a new insight that has the 'Ah Yes' quality about it, as though another window of the mind is opened to shed new light upon a subject, making that moment an enlightening time. Hear again the words Jesus uses in the Johannine passage: 'God's gift is living water'. In other places in Scripture this is described in the phrase, 'the fount of living waters'. What is worship for Jesus? He articulates the answer so well in response to the woman's statement about the proper worship place in verse 20. Jesus expands her awareness of place in verses 21, 23 and 24 of Chapter 4.

First, it is not the place that makes worship. The new phase of the proclamation of the revelation of God will go beyond Jewish borders to all the world. Neither Gerizim or Zion will be the worship place, not necessarily on mountain, temple, cathedral or humble house meeting. Neither the physical place, nor gracious building is of primary importance. Jesus says real worshippers will worship the Father in Spirit and in Truth.

Intellect takes us so far, emotion and heart desire another step, but unless we are in tune with the Spirit, we cannot truly worship. We are required to worship truthfully and openly. Before God, we cannot have hidden agendas we choose not to disclose. The man who had a complaint against his brother had to put his worship offering down, make things right with his brother, then his worship offering would be accepted.

One of the designations of God in the New Testament is 'God is Spirit' – that is why acknowledgement of God is not enough. 'God is Spirit and they that worship must worship him in Spirit and in Truth'. This is doubly emphasised in the text. When a person is in tune with the eternal in this way, the inflow of the spiritual into that person is so easy, the presence of God so evident, the resolve of 'prayed for difficulties' so assured, the love poured into the heart so abundant. May we tune ourselves daily into spiritual conversation and worship with the God and Father of us all and know his Peace.