

John 4:1-15 The discipline of ministry

Introduction

Jesus was having a very successful ministry in Judea. John 4:1 gives us some information but only a glimpse into an early phase of ministry in an otherwise unpromising part of Israel. Most of the time the responses there were minimal or negative in terms of the religious leaders in particular, though there were always ordinary people who heard Him gladly. *Now Jesus learned that the Pharisees had heard that He was gaining and baptising more disciples than John – ² although in fact it was not Jesus who baptised, but His disciples.* The natural human response to such success would have been to continue for a much longer time in that place. I suspect few of us would have thought the obvious thing to do was to move on at that stage. Yet our Lord was convinced that there was a greater need to attend to in Samaria. John 4:3 states: ³ *So He left Judea and went back once more to Galilee.* For followers of Jesus in this world we can be one of two kinds of people. The first category is of believers who may be very faithful at worship services but make a point of not mixing with needy people, or of not acquainting themselves with information from overseas whether of missionaries or wars or famines or other troubles; they have done nothing wrong, but neither are they willing to make a difference in the world for God. The second category are those who have open hearts who love God but also love other people. They may have different gifts and use them in a wide variety of ways, but are willing to get involved with people in need, with its costs of finance or time and possibly other resources. I thank God for what I hear of people in this church who serve in church, the wider community or in other ways as an expression of their love for the Lord. Life can be costly and hard. An increasing proportion of people around us don't want to get involved. No more than one-third of the adult population is reckoned to give any regular time in voluntary or charitable service in the community. As a society without the voluntary sector things would start to fall apart in a serious way. I am grateful to God that we are an outward-looking church and the involvement with the Foodbank, Street Chaplains and now Christians against Poverty, all ministries alongside fellow DECA Churches augurs well for our profile as a Church that cares for people beyond our committed core community, at home as well as overseas.

There is, though, a price to pay for being big-hearted Christians committed to the discipline of ministry. We will be moved by the needs around us. We will be overwhelmed at times by the scale of needs thrust into our in tray. We may also feel discouraged by the little difference we feel we have made to extending God's kingdom in the place He has put us. James Gilmour (1843-1891), one of the pioneer Scottish Christian missionaries in Mongolia, wrote these words towards the end of his life. 'In the shape of converts I have seen no result, I have not, as far as I am aware, seen anyone who even wanted to be a Christian.' He has made lonely heroic efforts to preach the gospel to a people steeped in a form of Buddhism. He spent all his summers with the nomadic Mongols on the plains of Mongolia and winters with the Mongols in Peking (Beijing). His wife unable to cope with the physical hardships of the summer treks stayed in Peking where he joined her over the winter months. His wife died shortly after the birth of their third child in 1885. He continued serving in eastern Mongolia until his death aged 47, after 21 years of missionary service. He was faithful unto death. An entry in his diary shortly after his arrival in the country contained these words: 'Several huts in sight. When shall I be able to speak to the people? O Lord suggest by the Spirit how I should come among them, and in preparing myself to teach the life and love of Christ Jesus...I have not, as far as I am aware, seen anyone who even wanted to be a Christian.' [various online sources provided information here]. Yet without the incredible pioneering work of

men and woman like James and Emily Gilmour the amazing spiritual harvest of the last few decades in Mongolia could not have happened. In the discipline of ministry some Christians have more of a sowing ministry; others see a greater harvest, but not because they are more spiritual, more gifted or more blessed –rather because in the providence of God His purposes have been fulfilled in the salvation of sinners saved by His amazing grace. God calls each one of us to the discipline of ministry. Together in His name we will stand and serve, which in His time will produce spiritual fruit.

1. A determination to be available to God

⁴ *Now He had to go through Samaria.* ⁵ *So He came to a town in Samaria called Sychar, near the plot of ground Jacob had given to his son Joseph.* ⁶ *Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired as He was from the journey, sat down by the well. It was about noon.* Jews and Samaritans didn't mix. Atrocities in the previous century ensured that. Although minor skirmishes compared to the blood-letting in Syria, Libya, Afghanistan and many more countries today, it was enough to be remembered with animosity so that the divisions between the two communities were retained. The Palestinian Authority newspaper in its comments on Thursday 6 June regarding the fall of Qusair, the small city near the Lebanese border with Syria, noted that it was punishment for misconduct in 636 (AD my dating) that the Persians (Iranians) came to help the Syrian Army retake the town [BBC News website 6 June 2013]. Retaining a grudge takes on a new meaning if those comments have any degree of accuracy at all! It is a reminder that in the Middle East in particular perceptions of timescales are much longer than in the Western world. Imperialistic adventures by a previous government are written off as history by their successors, but overseas how often those memories are held as fresh for generations. In a context where unpleasant feelings had run deep Jesus wanted to break the cycle of despair and bring fresh hope and a future to these people. Yet the way He went about it was in not the expected manner. Today PR executives would recommend an advertising blitz declaring that things had changed! Or some publicity stunts to show how much Jews really loved the Samaritans after all! But this was not how Jesus operated; on the surface it appears a strange mission strategy. It was a most unlikely place for a Jew to be found. Likewise when the disciples went into the small town to purchase some food they too would have elicited looks of surprise from passers by and even shopkeepers or stall holders. It was counter-cultural and unexpected. Yet to their surprise there is no indication in John's account that they were made to feel unwelcome. In this context just being in that unexpected public space openly without apology was a statement in itself to the local people. What is important was that there were no moral issues involved in being there; it was simply a place Jews avoided. These people who gathered there didn't meet believers in the course of their daily lives. Recognising this point invites us to think about the places where we go. For those of us of working age our presence in the workplace is important. The Monday conversation about the weekend's activities or other regular topics ensure that others will over time pick up that our lifestyle choices may follow a different pattern to theirs and they may wonder why. For others of us a social activity leads to contact with other people and faith-related issues may crop up at times. Jesus was in Sychar we are in other places but our presence over time is significant and a consistent witness will in varying degrees arouse some curiosity about the distinctive features of our lives.

John gives us some information about the timing of Jesus' visit. John 4:5-6 records: *So He came to a town in Samaria called Sychar, near the plot of ground Jacob had given to his son Joseph.* ⁶ *Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired as He was from the journey, sat down by the well. It was about noon.* Although a public place it was unlikely to be populated at that time of day. The heat was intense and the average citizen would be indoors getting some sleep or rest until

the temperature cooled down at least a little. As a result over the scheduled time Jesus had there only one person made a planned visit to the well. Yet this would be God's opportunity. Had there been a crowd of locals this woman would have made herself scarce exceedingly quickly. She did not want to mix with other people. This unusual time of day for social interaction was just the right time for her and Jesus put Himself out to be there –it turns out for her. Do we recognise the sovereignty of God in His divine appointments? There is no luck or chance in His universe. There is plenty that puzzles us and as the years go by I think my list is increasing –maybe yours is as well! However, we need to hang on to the fact that He has a divine purpose for each one of us and a plan for our lives, that we may use for our good (and other people's good too) and for His glory the gifts and abilities He has entrusted to us. God's timing is not the same as ours. It is when we least expect it that opportunities for witness arise. In Acts 8:26-40 there is the extraordinary story of Philip meeting the Ethiopian Chancellor of the Exchequer. He has been busy in a major evangelistic ministry in Samaria – no prizes for guessing whose ministry had opened up the way several years earlier! Luke records this information in Acts 8:26-29 *Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, 'Go south [or at noon] to the road – the desert road – that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.'* ²⁷ *So he started out, and on his way he met an Ethiopian eunuch, an important official in charge of all the treasury of the Candace (which means 'queen of the Ethiopians'). This man had gone to Jerusalem to worship,* ²⁸ *and on his way home was sitting in his chariot reading the Book of Isaiah the prophet.* ²⁹ *The Spirit told Philip, 'Go to that chariot and stay near it.'* ³⁰ *Then Philip ran up to the chariot and heard the man reading Isaiah the prophet.* Philip wasn't told who God had planned him to meet by the side of a normally busy main road. This was the quietest time of day when few people travelled, but most importantly was God's time for this man to have the Gospel explained to him. Each of us will have these God moments. We may not even have been praying for them. Early in my time in Broughty Ferry I caught a train in Dundee to attend a meeting in Edinburgh. I hadn't booked a particular seat but had a few I could have chosen in the carriage I entered. I took probably the nearest one to me and sat down next to a student from Aberdeen who had come from mainland China. A short while into the journey she spoke introducing herself and explaining her reason for being in the country. However, she also said that she had heard this was a Christian country and she wanted to find out what Christians believe –could I help her? I knew this would be a quick journey to our capital city. It was wonderful to seek to provide answers to a whole range of questions. I gave her my contact details and let her know she could be in touch at any time. She hasn't, but who knows God maybe only intended our paths to cross once. You too will have your stories...

2. A Willingness to endure for God

However *Jesus was tired* He was ready for a break. He was exhausted doing God's work and whatever passed for His regular routine. He had an itinerant ministry which with constant travel can bring its own pressure. Matthew 8:18-20 states: *When Jesus saw the crowd around Him, He gave orders to cross to the other side of the lake.* ¹⁹ *Then a teacher of the law came to Him and said, 'Teacher, I will follow you wherever you go.'* ²⁰ *Jesus replied, 'Foxes have dens and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head.'* Travelling can be fun but too quickly it can be a necessary chore. If you travel a lot with your work or in other contexts why not pray for 'God' appointments' to cross your pathway as He directs. Over time there will be opportunities maybe when you too are tired and want to do anything but engage in conversation with people. One thing to reflect on here: The people who make a difference in life do often have very full lives. This is not necessarily a virtue in itself, but dedicated people who strive to accomplish something will exhaust themselves accomplishing the task before them. Do you know a successful rugby player who leaves the field of play without breaking

sweat? A successful political negotiator who has not lost a few night's sleep during protracted negotiations? An overseas missionary pioneering in the most difficult of places? The privations Adoniram Judson and his wives (first ones died in Burma) striving to live for Jesus in that part of Asia. Yet today the Christians in that country endure as much persecution and hardship as those early missionaries, but they have hardly known anything else. Paul told the Thessalonian Christians in I Thessalonians 2:9 *Surely you remember, brothers and sisters, our toil and hardship; we worked night and day in order not to be a burden to anyone while we preached the gospel of God to you.* His words were even more graphic in II Corinthians 11: 26-29. ²⁶*I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my fellow Jews, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false believers.* ²⁷*I have laboured and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked.* ²⁸*Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches.* ²⁹*Who is weak, and I do not feel weak? Who is led into sin, and I do not inwardly burn?* These are challenging and inspiring words, and remind us that the growth of the Christian Church over the last hundred years has been due to a significant degree to people who have endured similar privations for the Lord. Are we willing to heed Paul's exhortation in Galatians 6:9: *Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up.* We too have a calling to perseverance.

3. **A determination to reach out to people**

⁷*When a Samaritan woman came to draw water, Jesus said to her, 'Will you give me a drink?'* ⁸*(His disciples had gone into the town to buy food.)* ⁹*The Samaritan woman said to Him, 'You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?' (For Jews do not associate with Samaritans.)* ¹⁰*Jesus answered her, 'If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked Him and He would have given you living water.'* ¹¹*'Sir,' the woman said, 'you have nothing to draw with and the well is deep. Where can you get this living water?'* ¹²*Are you greater than our father Jacob, who gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did also his sons and his livestock?'* Jesus didn't have a gospel tract to give her or some other literature; nor could He invite her to a small enquirers group to find out about God. In addition, in a culture where Samaritans don't talk to Jews and women and men never mixed outside of the immediate family relations it was not a promising social context for good conversation. Yet Jesus chose to begin with a safe topic about which there had to be common ground. Scarcity of water supplies is a huge issue in the Middle East and will be for the foreseeable future. You cannot easily rustle up a baby or a dog that are great conversation starters with many strangers. The latter is probably less expensive to keep but a big call if your only reason is to enable you to start friendly conversations with strangers! What is important here was that asked questions that appeared appropriate in the context. Although the woman would have had a degree of discomfort her increasing curiosity enabled this barrier to be lowered to a significant degree; before she knew it the Lord had naturally guided her to think about her spiritual wellbeing. I greatly admire the small number of Christians who have outstanding gifts in this area and so naturally create opportunities to share their faith. In part there is both a gifting and an intentionality about their witnessing. You and I may not have that level of gifting but in prayer we can ask God to raise our expectancy levels to be used in His service. What is it I might have in common with this work colleague or social companion? Conversations about the scarcity of water are probably not too promising here in Scotland! What happened here was entirely natural. Jesus used the circumstances that had arisen to break down a barrier.

Some years ago Australian Anglican Bishop John Reid recalled an incident when as a young minister he was seeking to enable a group of white boys and another of black aborigine children to mix and build friendships with one another. The bus was full for the journey to the place where he had arranged some activities for them to undertake. It was not a promising start the children of one ethnic identity filled the seats on one side of the bus and the other group across the aisles from them. As he drove the bus the barbed comments with racial overtones increased to the level at which he could stand it no longer. At a safe place to stop he ordered all the boys out and banned them from making reference to being 'white' or 'black'. In fact, he gave them a dressing down and ordered each one to declare: 'I'm green' before he was allowed back on the bus. Thankfully everyone agreed to cooperate or he would have been in trouble! Feeling pleased with himself they set off and harmony seemed to have arrived until he heard someone mutter: 'Alright, light green on this side and dark green on the other'! [R. Kent Hughes, *Disciplines of a Godly Man*, pp. 215-216] Reaching out to people in mission can take a long time before we see spiritual fruit in someone's life. There are though opportunities to speak to people and meet others who need the Lord. The skill Jesus exhibited was that His witnessing appeared natural. Too often as Western Christians we speak so infrequently that it feels anything but natural to seek to share our faith. Yet if we seriously ask the Lord to put us in touch with people He will do so – but be prepared for some unexpected people with whom we might be engaged in conversation. It is not easy to walk across the room and initiate conversation with a stranger, but that small talk might lead to something of eternal significance.

4. **A determination to persevere**

¹³ *Jesus answered, 'Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, ¹⁴ but whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life.'* ¹⁵ *The woman said to him, 'Sir, give me this water so that I won't get thirsty and have to keep coming here to draw water.'* In 1968 Kent Hughes, a young American pastor, took a group of twenty-five High School students on an evangelistic camping holiday. They had gone from their home in California to Parker, Colorado, for this Easter trip. Hughes and a colleague had previously scouted the area, where thousands of young people from California went for holidays at that time of year. They selected an appropriate campsite for their team. For some unknown reason when they showed up the site was not available. A whole day in the heat was spent travelling to other potential camping sites and receiving rejections. Convinced there had to be somewhere for them to pitch their tents they persevered and eventually as the sun was setting they got a place to stay. Their site was next to one occupied by a group of five senior high school pupils enjoying their break. They got on very well and ended up doing a number of things together. By the time they parted four out of the five had made professions of faith and thirty years later three were continuing strongly as Christians, two of them in the pastoral ministry. They were miles from their preferred campground but God had put them in touch in His time with the people He intended them to meet that trip. Proverbs 16:9 reminds us *In their hearts humans plan their course, but the Lord establishes their steps.* For Jesus that day it was Sychar and God arranged for Him to meet a woman with a troubled life. Who knows whom God will place in our pathways this week or in coming weeks? What is important is to persevere disciplined in the ministries to which He has called us, for Jesus' sake, Amen.