“Mad dogs and Englishmen go out in the midday sun”

There is a song written by Noel Coward and first performed in The Third Little Show in New York in June 1931 by Beatrice Lillie. The song is especially known for the line, “Mad dogs and Englishmen go out in the midday sun”, with which most verses begin and end. Well, as it happens, not only mad dogs and Englishmen! There was a woman long ago who went out in the midday sun and her story is told in John’s Gospel (John 4: 1-30). In the relentless heat of the Middle Eastern midday sun! That was indeed crazy! Why did she do that?

This woman, whose name we do not know, used to go out in the middle of the day to fetch water from a well just outside the city. The well was known as Jacob’s Well which at that time was near the city of Sychar in Samaria. Today it lies within the West Bank. In those days it was a woman’s job to fetch water for her family each day. The women used to go out early in the morning while it was still cool. No one went out at midday, it was far too hot. The women used to make a social occasion of this daily chore. They would catch up and talk at the well and we can imagine them chatting about the everyday things that formed part of their lives, sharing their frustrations, complaints, perhaps passing on the latest gossip, reminiscing, dreaming and laughing together. But the woman in our story used to go at midday because she knew that none of the other women would be at the well then. She went then so that she wouldn’t be seen. What drove her to this? Why this desire to avoid the others? Well, she was divorced and had had five husbands. Because of this she was a social outcast and was looked down upon. She was a sinner and her sin was known to everyone. She would be humiliated and uncomfortable as the other women would surely fall silent at her approach. It was a lonely life. A life of shame.

But one day she had an experience, an encounter at the well when she went out alone to fetch her water, and that encounter changed her life. It was a most unlikely thing to happen because firstly, it was a man who spoke to her. Remember we’re talking about first century Palestine and she was a woman in a society that really didn’t consider that women were of great value and certainly enforced strict rules of gender communication. Secondly, she was from Samaria, a Samaritan woman, and the man who spoke to her was a Jew. At that time the Jews looked down on the Samaritans. They considered them inferior and there was certainly no love lost between the two groups. This woman was despised in many ways.

Let’s think about what happened for this woman. First of all, all that she expected was turned upside down. We can just imagine her approaching the well and seeing a man sitting there. Her heart must have sunk. She couldn’t run away because she needed the water. She must have felt anxious and cornered. ‘Someone else to look down on me’, she must have thought. And she was defensive too! When Jesus asked her for a drink she argued with him: Why are you asking me for a drink? You, a man and a Jew? But Jesus didn’t get caught up in all that business about her being a woman, a Samaritan, a sinner. He talked to her. He connected with her. When I reflect on this story I always think what an incredible moment that must have been for her, a moment not only of the unexpected but indeed of tenderness. Something she was not used to. We all need to be loved and known. That is probably the most basic and deepest
human longing we have - to connect, to be loved. And when we do experience someone who loves us no matter how we are, I’m sure you’ll agree, it’s the best thing ever. A sacramental moment. The encounter between the two of them, the Samaritan woman, the sinner and Jesus, shifted from a shared drink of water to living water, the quenching of that deep spiritual thirst, that deeply human longing to be loved. As Jesus softened her hardened, fearful heart and broke through the wall she had so effectively built around herself, he let her know that he knew her story and understood her pain, that he did not cast her aside because of her poor choices. And he did something else. He broke down the religious barrier too, the disagreement between Jews and Samaritans about where God was to be worshipped and he simply pointed to a deeper truth: those who worship God, he said, worship in Spirit and in truth.

We know that this woman was changed because she ran back to the village to tell everyone what had happened! This woman who had been silent, a loner, defensive and ashamed of herself, was able to tell her story. Jesus knew her story and he did not condemn her. What courage that gave her! How it shifted her self-perception. So she told the others about this man. The despised woman now the bringer of life, the messenger of ‘good news’. And they all went out to find him too. What shared longing and need we all have!

We all have our ‘midday sun’, the places we go to avoid contact and intimacy, where we hide in our shame and failure. I am sure each of us can think of a time we have felt really miserable - lonely, left out, perhaps sensing or even imagining people are talking about us and judging us. How do we respond when those things happen to us? Usually, we just want to run away. When we feel judged and gossiped about we try to avoid people, and as a result our loneliness and isolation and sadness just get worse. We shrink, we become more unsure of ourselves. When these moments are few and far between we can usually bounce back with a bit of sensible self-talk or some help from a friend. The problem is when the ‘extra-ordinary’ becomes normal, when what may have been a one-off becomes the way we primarily see ourselves and we become isolated, cut off from the communities within which we are meant to be nourished and flourish. And when this happens the great sadness is that we can forget the Divine image we bear, the ‘breath of God’ breathed into us, as the Genesis story says.

There is something profoundly relational about being human. When we consider the life and teachings and indeed the healings of Jesus we find that all his healing, preaching and reaching out to people was in order to bring them back into the community from which they were isolated. His clash with the Pharisees was all about this. The Pharisees were the upholders of the letter of the Law and they policed Jewish society, passing judgement on those who did not measure up. Jesus accused them of placing heavy burdens on people. The Pharisees had a long list of people they considered outside the pale: people suffering illness of any kind, physical, emotional or mental and people who were sinners, who broke the Law. All such people were considered ‘unclean’ or ritually impure. They were banished from the community and sent to live outside the city or they were prohibited from taking part in ritual and worship. They were the lost, the ones who did not belong. We think of the Gospel stories of lepers living in isolated groups beyond the city walls, forced to wear a bell around their neck to warn others of their approach. When Jesus healed a group of ten lepers (Luke 17: 11-19) he told them to go to the priests and show them that they were healed, in other words, that they could now return to normal life. We think of the Gerasene demoniac (Mark 5: 1-20) who roamed amongst the
tombs. Such loneliness, such sadness. Jesus healed him and told him to go home to his people. When I visited Jerusalem a few years ago the group I was with sat at the ruins of the pools of Bethsaida and listened to the Gospel story of the crippled man who used to sit day after day trying to get into the water that he believed would cure him. But each time the water flowed into the pools the crowd would surge forward and he had no chance of reaching the pools’ edge. But one day Jesus came by and saw him sitting there and he healed him. Of course the man was overjoyed, but what I find most touching in this story is that he immediately jumped up and went to the Temple to praise God and to show himself to be healed. He was no longer excluded and cast out. He was restored to community, to relationship. What great loneliness he had endured. But now he was brought in from the margins.

This indeed is what it means to be ‘church’, what it means to live and spread the ‘good news’. The ‘salvation’ Jesus modelled for us is to live and relate in such a way that no one is ever cast out, beyond the pale of our love and God’s embrace. The way we communicate this truth is by living it ourselves. This means that our own self-perception may need to change. Our own self-condemnation must cease. We must get out of the midday sun of our own making. “Come to me all who are weary and burdened and I will give you rest” (Matthew 11:28), says Jesus. The difficult thing of course is to quieten all those voices within us, the voices that have slowly over time taken up residency in our minds and hearts. Many of these come from others’ judgement, from expectations and assumptions and from the sometimes unrealistic standard against which we measure ourselves. But the ‘voice’ of God calls us to relationship. The word it speaks is ‘Come’. And we must help others to do that too.

From a Christian perspective the goal of our life is to abandon ourselves more and more fully to the God revealed and manifest to us in and through Jesus. The key point is that we do this in community and we do it by allowing the Spirit of God that moved so freely in Jesus’ life to move in our own lives too. This Spirit is given expression when we trust and deeply appreciate the greater context of Love in which we live and when we acknowledge our own divine core. As we grow in this self-abandonment to God, to Love, we become what St Paul speaks of as “no longer I who live but Christ lives in me” (Galatians 2:20). This transformation comes about as we live in justice, compassion, love, inclusivity, hospitality to all and forgiveness.

We are diverse, we are many and we are called to be one. We are called to move towards ever greater connectedness and relationship in our diversity, not denying it but embracing it and connecting nonetheless. Connectedness is easy with people we like and are drawn to, people we see as being the same as we are. The challenge comes in the form of ‘the other’, those who are different, foreign, who do not live as we do, whose moral standards don’t seem to measure up to ours. Franciscan spiritual writer Richard Rohr says, “We may begin by making connections with family and friends, with nature and animals, and then grow into deeper connectedness with those outside our immediate circle, especially people of races, religions, economic classes, gender, and sexual orientation that are different from our own. Finally, we can and will experience this full connectedness as union with God. For some it starts the other way around: they experience union with God – and then find it easy to unite with everything else. Without connectedness and communion, we don’t fully exist as our truest selves. Becoming who we are is a matter of learning how to become more and more deeply connected”. 
St Paul came up with a wonderful metaphor for this living web of relationship - the Body of Christ (Corinthians 12:12). Just as our physical body has many parts, each with its own character and function and each needed for the fullness and well-being of the whole body, so each person in our human community is vital in his or her uniqueness. It is the one Spirit that is manifest in each member. “At the heart of this body, providing the energy that enlivens the whole community, although each in different ways, is ‘the love of God that has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit’ (Romans 5:5), says Rohr. Such an understanding of community leads us into a real appreciation of the importance of connectedness and relationship.

So our call is to get out of the midday sun, move towards connectedness, let go of discrimination and judgment, and in so doing enable others to come in from the margins too.

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