**11th October 2015**

**John 4**

Wednesday was a big night. Some of us gathered at St. James Church for the annual Churches Together lecture in which Iman Sajid Patel spoke about Islam today , whilst millions tuned in for the Great British Bake Off Final. The eventual winner was

Nadiya Hussain a British Muslim of Bangladeshi heritage.

She is a Luton-born 30-year-old mum-of-three, who baked a "big fat British wedding cake" adorned with jewels from her own wedding day as the showstopper in Wednesday's final.

But Nadiya Hussain's Muslim background became the focus for some newspaper columnists. Before the final, the Daily Mail columnist Amanda Platell claimed white contestant Flora Shedden didn't have a hope with her chocolate carousel in the semi-finals whereas "if she'd made a chocolate mosque, she'd have stood a better chance". After the victory, The Sun's TV columnist Ally Ross claimed BBC executives "no doubt did a multi-cultural jig of politically-correct joy" when judges Paul Hollywood and Mary Berry crowned Nadiya their winner.

Online, the Great British Bake Off has a huge fan base - with over 300,000 tweets sent about the final programme alone. The majority of fans rapidly rallied behind Hussain. One tweeted "people of colour know how this works: you apply yourself, prove your talent and then have your success deemed pc". She won because of her baking skills. Anything else detracts from that fact".

On talent competitions like X factor, the audience can tell whether someone can sing or not. On Bake Off we rely almost entirely on the judges for the verdict. The cake may look good, but as they say, the proof is in the pudding or the tasting. Hence the opportunity to accuse the programme of political correctness in the way it reached its verdict.

At the churches together lecture, the Iman talked about the prejudices and challenges they face living in modern day Britain. He was very open with us about the threat of extremism in the Islamic community. He stressed the need for neighbourliness whatever our creed. It is one of the key issues of our day how we live alongside those who are different to us

Over the next few weeks we have a few stories in John’s gospel of how Jesus encounters people starting with his trek into Samaria.

Do you notice that John writes that Jesus ‘had to go through Samaria to get to Galilee from Judea? It is a short cut but most devout Jews avoided it because there were cultural, religious, political animosity between the Jews and Samaritans. But Jesus decided to travel through Samaria. He made a deliberate decision to break down barriers of prejudice and mistrust. Some even see Jesus’ route as a protest against the stubborn refusal of the Pharisees to mix with people beyond their faith.

We went to number of places in Israel and the West Bank Palestinian territories where tourists fear to tread. And we were greeted with warmth and hospitality. People were so grateful that we had bothered to cross the barriers and the prejudices.

When you travel on the Israeli roads in the West bank there are large red danger signs at the entrance to roads off stating that you’re about to enter Palestinian territory and that you are endangering your life and that it is illegal to travel on these roads if you are Israelis. The signs give the impression that all Palestinians want to kill you if you enter their space.

One sign had been defaced by activists with the slogan ‘we are not monsters: we are human beings. You are welcome’.

One Palestinian Christian priest we came across joked with us about a ecent encounter with an Israeli soldier The soldier said ‘what are you doing here?’ Father Faras replied ‘what are you doing here? I’ve been in this land longer than you’

The soldier asked if he had any bombs hidden under his cassock. ‘Are you threatened by my dress’ he replied? ‘All Palestinians are dirty’ the soldier answered. The priest said ‘for 7 years our grandfathers could go to any place but now look at us. The Nazis persecuted you and put you into ghettos and now you are doing the same to us’.

The Priest, Father Faras called on other Christian leaders to stand up for the Palestinian Christians and say they are not dirty, not criminals and not to be seen solely as the problem. He called for bridges to be built over the walls: quite literally when you see the separation barrier in Jerusalem.

Father Faras ministers in the small mainly Christian village of Zababdeh in Samaria. His church has grown from 5 people in 2002 to 140 members now and he reaches out over the divide. Their Catholic School of 1200 pupils is attended half by Christians and half by Muslims. Apparently the Muslim children joke as they look up at the crucifix above the main door, that these Christians are serious students. If they fail - they get crucified. The clinic that the church runs serves everyone. Whilst only 1% of the population in the West bank are Christians, they run 40% of health and education institutions.

Peace needs builders in Father Faras’s words. He says he sees the smile of Jesus on every page of the gospel. He sees the world without borders. The kingdom of God is not a geographical place, it is not territorial, but a kingdom of justice and peace.

Where is our Samaria? Where are our boundaries? There are a lot of barriers and walls in our society and prejudices, especially against people of faith. This we have in common with Muslims. If people know you are a Christian and that you go to church they can have certain prejudices and assumptions about you. How can you bridge the wall?

As well as crossing a race boundary, Jesus also crossed a gender boundary in talking to a woman in Samaria. As a holy man it was indeed a no – no to talk on your own to a single female. Hendce the surprise reaction of the disciples when they found out in verse 27. Social boundaries can prevent people coming to faith. We all know that it is notoriously difficult to get men interested in the faith. In working class areas particularly, church is for women and children, not for manly men – and now that most women are working or trying to be like men, the women have stopped going to church as well!

I’ve talked with many women whose men are just not interested in Christianity or the church. And I’ve talked with men who have eventually come to faith and what helped them.

The women say that the support of others was invaluable. A prayer partner, someone to lean on, a shoulder to cry on helped. One woman said to me that she could have developed a mind-set that it was her, her friend and God against her husband. But that sort of attitude would eventually leak into her relationship and poison it. Her friend helped her focus on the good aspects of her relationship with her husband and helped her focus on God. She kept building the common ground that she shared with her husband so that they didn’t drift apart and that intimacy grew, from which intimate sharing such as your beliefs, could take place.

Many of the husbands who found faith have said how they appreciated the restraint of their wives not to push Christianity down their throats. One bloke however told me about how his wife would leave Christian books open at a certain page, strategically placed around the house, in the hope that he would notice them fortunately it just made him amused rather than irritated.

These men who came to faith say that they eventually saw the integrity of their partners’ everyday life as a Christian and that spoke more powerfully than any sermon they preached. As they grew in their faith they increasingly became people of deeper integrity, love, self-sacrifice and humility and this made them more open to what this positive force in their partner’s lives was all about. They kept praying – heartfelt prayers that changed their relationship to God and taught them about patience, forgiveness, wisdom, and love. Just like being in Samaria, it can be a hard land to be in.

Our Samaria may also have other social barriers. Churches can be very middle class. Our worship can be very cerebral – you need to read and write and think critically. Many can feel excluded, that’s its way beyond them and they don’t feel comfortable here. Others feel inadequate, perhaps their lifestyle or experiences suggest they are not good enough to come to church. There are no easy ways round that.

Jesus it could be argued made the women at the well uncomfortable when he asked her to go and call her husband. She admitted that she had no husband. Jesus told her she had had five husbands and the man she now had was not her husband.

Scholars argue whether or not this is just a factual statement or whether it is a value laden statement. The detail that the woman has come to draw water at noon suggest that she had a guilty secret to hide. The normal time for women to draw water would be in the cooler parts of the day: first thing in the morning or late afternoon. Not midday. If you went at midday you usually did so to avoid contact with a lot of people: people would could gossip about you or give you a hard time. In that ‘shame based’ society you would want to avoid contact with people who may comment on your immoral lifestyle. Although Jesus hints that he knows about this, it doesn’t stop him from talking to her and also touching on the matter.

Sometimes we can be too polite in avoiding difficult subjects. Perhaps we are concerned not to be seen as judgemental or interfering. But perhaps we are too polite and not challenging what we should challenge. Especially in maters of belief. The Iman at the lecture on Wednesday night was asked about his view of Jesus. Muslims of course do not accept that Jesus was the son of God. They honour him as a prophet but do not believe he died on the cross and that he was resurrected. I believe Jesus did die on a cross and was resurrected as Lord and Saviour of the entire world. I can respect Muslims for their beliefs but I don’t have to agree with them. I hope I can witness to my own faith whilst also being in dialogue to those who are different to me.

In this story Jesus tested the water with this woman by making a potentially challenging remark to see if the woman closed down and backed off or whether she would be open enough to explore further. Jesus engages her with conversation that is teasing and engaging. When she diverts the conversation from her lifestyle to the traditions of her ancestors and the worship of the Samaritans, Jesus asks the question of truth: what is true worship. He says true worshippers will worship the Father in the spirit and in truth. When she replies that she is waiting for the Messiah to explain everything Jesus jumps in and says ‘I the one who is speaking to you is he’.

If you believe that Jesus was resurrected it makes all the difference to life and belief. This is good news, worth sharing; even if it is deemed politically incorrect. It is a question of truth and there always has been a battle for truth in the world. You tell me your truth and I’ll tell you mine. You make your choices: you pay your money, you make your choice. How you share your truth is the all-important question. Do you shove it down someone’s throat? Do you ban other truths – such as some Muslim countries where Christian witness is prohibited? Or do you create openings for discussion and dialogue?

Jesus treated this woman with respect. He didn’t shun her as a Jewish man approached by a Samaritan woman would have been expected to. But he gave her time and consideration. We will never get into conversations with people about our faith unless we make time for them. Have them round for meals, go out with them, and do sport with them, whatever. But then crucially Jesus decided to turn the conversation from the routine to the spiritual.

*Are we prepared to turn conversations from the routine to the spiritual?*

Jesus took advantage of the circumstances that they found themselves in – they were talking about water, so He used ‘living water’ as an analogy for God which aroused her curiosity. After which he unfolded his message slowly at a pace she could take it in.

When I was a social worker I remember one day we were in the office at the end of a very stressful day. My self and some of my colleagues had been involved in a difficult case and we were all exhausted and strained. One of my colleagues, Linda, asked me if I was OK and how was I going to cope with the stress. I said instinctively what I would honestly do, ‘I’ll have a hot bath and I’ll pray’. Immediately she was curious about the role of prayer in my life. Do you find prayer helpful? How do you pray? Does God answer your prayers etc.? Maybe because I was stressed I hadn’t put up my usual inhibitions about sharing my faith. I had just responded to her innocent question honestly and instinctively.

I’ve had to learn over the years not to be defensive or apologetic for the richness and the blessing I feel I have in being a Christian. So long as you don’t come over all sanctimonious and holier than thou and you are real, people will, I’ve found, more often than not, be fascinated by your faith and experience. We have swallowed hook line and sinker, the attitude that one shouldn’t talk about religion because no-one is interested. Well they may not be that interested in you going on about church and institutional religion but I bet they are interested in how your faith helps you cope with life, how you deal with stress, where you find happiness and hope, cope with guilt, offer forgiveness, choose between right and wrong.

When we listen and get to know other people, we’ll come across natural opportunities to allow spiritual topics to flavour our conversation.

Not so long ago I was speaking to someone who was bemoaning the fact that there is no sense of community today. No one cares for anybody else. No-one looks out for you. We are all alone in society. I agreed to some extent. I said yes we all live very individual lives and often don’t know who our neighbour is. But then I added ‘I’m just glad I belong to a church’ I left it at that and allowed this person to take me up on the point. They did. They took the bait. They went on to ask why am I glad to belong to a church and having asked me the question I had permission to answer knowing that I would have their attention because they asked the question.

I was not being manipulative. I was being honest. I’m extremely grateful for the church. Despite all its faults and failings it is a place where we are committed to look after each other, sometimes admittedly clumsily. But we do stand against the tide of our self-obsessed individualised society. And I am happy to tell others of that treasure.

The stuff of our lives, the experiences of our lives, will be the stuff that God can use. When you have been through adversity how did your faith help. When you have been low did your faith bring you through? Can you say a word about that when someone shares with you a problem and then asks you what can they do? Where can they get help?

So Jesus has suggested to this woman at the well that he can offer her living water that can spring up in them to eternal life. It is a cryptic comment, not fully explained but the woman picks up on it and is intrigued.

‘Living water’ was a regular phrase used in those days to describe running water, in other words water that was not stagnant but fresh and therefore healthy and safe. But there is a double meaning in the way Jesus tells it to suggest the idea of new life, eternal life, a change in your life that can bring freshness and hope and positive change as you come to know Jesus Christ. As you receive his Spirit within it is like a stream bubbling up inside you, bringing refreshment. The woman wants this water, she is thirsty and open to receiving this experience. There are many thirsty people out there. Do not assume that they are not interested in the living water of the spirit of Jesus from which you drink. Break down those barriers that we can often erect when we assume that people are not interested in our faith.

Like Jesus we are called to reach across the walls that divide us, to bring friendship and faith. May the living water flow.

Questions:

1. Where are the boundaries, the modern day Samaria’s, that we usually don’t cross. What are the people or issues we avoid?
2. When is it right to be polite and when is it right to challenge or question someone else’s beliefs or lifestyle?
3. Have you had any experience of benign discriminated against because of your faith? How did you react?
4. How can we drink from the ‘living water’ Jesus offers us?