

John 4 v 35 Seeing People as Jesus sees them

Introduction

In 1947 with tears streaking her cheeks Evie Brand (1879-1974) pleaded with her mission board. Rules were rules, they answered. She was too old to go back to India. She must retire. Evie had sacrificed her comforts, her tiny income, her family for the work. With her husband, Jesse, she had pioneered on the Mountains of Death until he died of fever. Year after year, she lived entirely on a small inheritance and set aside her official salary to buy parcels of land for the mission. But the board said it made no sense to appoint a sixty-eight year old woman to another five year term. Evie did not see it that way. Years ago, she and her husband Jesse had vowed to reach five mountain ranges with the gospel. Four still had to be reached. Evie felt that God intended for her to fulfil that vow. She saw one last chance. "Please just send me back for one year," she pleaded. "I promise not to make any more trouble. At the end of one year I will retire." Reluctantly the board agreed. Had they known Evie's secret plan, they would surely have refused. When her year with the mission ended, fellow missionaries gathered to wish her goodbye. Then came the shocker. Evie gleefully informed them that she was retiring from the mission-- retiring to take up independent work in the mountains. She would fulfil the promise that she and Jesse had undertaken years before. Protests and warnings fell on deaf ears. Rejoicing, seventy-year-old Evie began to fulfil Jesse's dream. Everyone called her "Granny," now, but she felt young. She travelled from village to village, riding a hill pony, camping, teaching, and dispensing medicine. She rescued abandoned children. The work was hard because her body was thin now. Life became even more difficult when she was dropped by her carriers and whacked her head on a rock. She never completely recovered her balance after that. She took to walking with bamboo canes in her hands. Yet the face that she turned upon the world was full of joy and laughter. "Praise God!" she exclaimed continually. Despite broken bones and fevers, she laboured on. In fifteen years, she almost eradicated Guinea worm from the Kalryan range. (Guinea worms grow several feet long under a person's skin.) Through her efforts, the five ranges were evangelized, and a mission work planted on each. She added two more ranges. "Extraordinary," said people. Granny insisted it was all God's doing. Whether on her mountains or off, she proclaimed Christ. In a hospital with a broken hip, she scooted on a carpet from room to room and talked to the other patients. She painted landscapes for them. Her bones knit in record time and back she went to the mountains to fight marijuana growers. Her son Paul visited her and found her looking not older but younger. "This is how to grow old," he wrote. "Allow everything else to fall away, until those around you see just love." Granny tore some ligaments and had to go to the plains for treatment. Before she could return to her beloved mountains, her speech became jumbled and her memory failed. Seven days later aged ninety-five, on 18th December 1974, she died. The next day her body was taken back to the hills and laid beside Jesse's while a multitude wept. The woman who was considered too old for missions had carried on for twenty-four more years [story extract from www.Christianity.com; full story in Dorothy Clark, *Granny Brand*, 1976]. I think we would all agree that 'Granny' Brand saw people as Jesus sees them and was an extraordinary woman of God. Her particular commitment to India was her calling; the question for each one of us is this: will I be faithful to the calling God has entrusted to me to share the good news of Jesus with the people I meet in daily life?

Our text for the year is John 4:35: *You know the saying, 'Four months between planting and harvest' But I say, 'walk up and look around. The fields are already ripe for harvest (NLV).'* However, in the earlier verses of this chapter Jesus modelled for us a response to the spiritual

needs around us. The pattern He set is a good one for us to copy today. How might we develop a lifestyle pattern that may over time produce spiritual fruit?

1. **Building friendships with People** (John 4:1-7)

¹ Now Jesus learned that the Pharisees had heard that He was gaining and baptizing more disciples than John—² although in fact it was not Jesus who baptized, but His disciples. ³ So He left Judea and went back once more to Galilee. 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. ⁷ When a Samaritan woman came to draw water, Jesus said to her, "Will you give Me a drink?" Jews did not mix with Samaritans. It was as simple as that. Many even declined to walk on roads through Samaria, preferring to take the long route north to Galilee or south to Judea. There was no chance of Samaritans coming to worship with the Jews as it was made very plain that they would not be welcome at their synagogues, let alone in the Jerusalem Temple. The average Jew viewed Samaritans as inferior human beings and wanted nothing to do with them. Jesus, by contrast, deliberately made a point not only of travelling through Samaria, but stopping there for a lunch break in the heat of the day. And in addition, had sent His disciples into a Samaritan community to purchase food; This action would have been as noticeable to both the locals and the disciples as a person of the opposite race entering a prohibited area during apartheid-era South Africa. It would have been the talking point of the community. What kind of Jewish rabbi sends His followers to mix with Samaritans? One very different from the majority was certain! The application of this point in our own social and cultural context is obvious. First and most obvious, people of all faiths and none, together with people of all racial backgrounds or of whatever lifestyle choice are welcome to attend services in this church and what is more we will be pleased to welcome them here. Our message is clear. The grace of God is needed by all; the love of God is offered to all who will receive it and the redemptive sacrifice of Jesus on the cross covers the sins of all who confess their guilt and desire His forgiveness. But we must go further than that; building friendships with people outside the fellowship is essential. We praise God for the good number of individuals, couples and families we are connected with through our work in various activities and organisations during the week, though we need to go further to reach the many thousands of people in this district who would never think to attend any activity we may put on however good or beneficial to them. The Street Chaplains work is one way of reaching the pub/ club goers in the town, but fundamentally it is at the personal level that we need to build relationships in our neighbourhood, workplace or social settings. This takes effort and time, but our intentional missionary calling is to meet people where they are; the *Just Walk Across the Room* initiative that we used last year brought this home to me - and I'm sure to others who attended those sessions. The Christian Church, to use a medical analogy, has often confused separation and isolation. When an epidemic of something is diagnosed doctors try to isolate the germ carriers and preventing the disease spreading. This can be very effective. However, when Christians isolate themselves from people outside the faith what chance is there of any influence for good. Jesus prayed for His followers in this way in John 17:15: *My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one.* In other words, that God would give us the wisdom and strength to live a constructive Christian life in the wider community, as much as that is possible. Pray with a sense of expectancy that God can use you by action or words to be an effective witness for Him, in the midst of the normal everyday activities we are engaged in.

2. Discussing Common interests (John 4:7-8)

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.)* There are plenty of people in our town and country who have had no meaningful contacts with any Christians. All they know about Evangelical Christians tends to come from the portrayal of deranged fanatics in the soaps on TV, like the plotline on EastEnders which portrayed Lucas Johnson, a Christian Pentecostal pastor, as a deranged killer whose deeds were motivated by his Christian faith. Viewers watched the pastor, played by actor Don Gilet, failing to help his ex-wife when she was dying, strangling a love rival to death, and attacking his current on-screen wife. Their image of church in general tends to be an impersonal dreary affair with no relation to the real world, led by an effeminate man dressed in clothes you would never find in Next or TK Maxx, who may have a sense of humour in keeping with Rev. IM Jolly or a larger than life woman cleric like the Vicar of Dibley. This is actually rather serious because when you or I state that we are Christians to some people immediately these appalling stereotypes will come to mind and it takes time and the building of relationships to show that these images are totally false and symptoms of secularist prejudice. How do we overcome such barriers? By building friendships with people and talking with them about things of common interest. How many people did you meet for the first time when out clearing snow and ice in your street? Many of us had that experience –no need to think of what to talk about! Likewise in the school, university or workplace there are always plenty of things of mutual interest that show we are normal people engaged in the real world. For Jesus and the Samaritan woman it was as natural to talk about water and drinking it as the average British citizen converses about the weather! Over time as we build friendships with people we discover what special interests they have and mutual respect can grow. The problem many of us have had over the years is a time management one –we can be too busy rushing from one task to another to spend that 30 seconds to a minute with someone, which over a few years can build up to a sizable chunk of our time wisely invested in others. Jesus was the supreme example of utilising those spare minutes for good in very practical ways.

3. Arousing interest from other people (John 4:9-15)

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?”* 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.”* As the time progressed the woman’s curiosity increased. Why is this Jewish man talking to me? Why is he respecting me in a way the average Jew of that day would not have done? In that culture Jews and Samaritans didn’t talk; men and women who were not relations or married did not talk to people of the other gender. Rabbis in particular were careful with whom they would converse. What is more people who were divorced or living together outside of marriage, like this woman, were socially ostracised and faced even more barriers at that time. The level of conversation was simple and practical and something

anyone could have done, but only Jesus chose to do it. Building friendships with people through showing interest in them and what is going on in their lives is not rocket science it is what Jesus would do today as he did then. People would notice you are a Christian if you went around with a sandwich board over your shoulders with the message 'I'm a Christian-Ask me about it' written on it. However, in twenty-first century Britain, the message such an action would communicate is not one that would enhance your witness or mine! This woman vocalises her curiosity and asks Jesus why he is asking her for help. Interestingly she is more than willing to assist him and appreciates being asked. There are many good people in our society who find it difficult to accept help from other people, but are more than willing to give it when others have a need. This may be the way we can connect with someone. In this case Jesus chose to make statements that aroused her curiosity to ask him more questions. It is important to note that although Jesus could have given an exhaustive lecture on the nature of God, and much more besides, he chose to engage with this woman on a level that she understood and at a pace she was comfortable with. He made no assumptions about her previous knowledge of God, but provided openings for her to ask him about who he was and the nature of his work. Over time the vast majority of people want to find out more about individuals who have shown an interest in them. Sometimes having copies of booklets like *The Real Jesus* or *Ultimate Questions* available to give away, may be more appropriate in some instances, than trying to engage in a longer conversation. We need to have the confidence to believe that we have something worth sharing and to recognise that many people are searching for a meaning or purpose in their lives and pray that God will put us into contact with them.

4. **Be brief –and to the point** (John 4:13-18)

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." ¹⁶ He told her, "Go, call your husband and come back." ¹⁷ "I have no husband," she replied. Jesus said to her, "You are right when you say you have no husband. ¹⁸ The fact is, you have had five husbands, and the man you now have is not your husband. What you have just said is quite true." At this stage Jesus limits the amount of information He gives about who He is and why He has come to Samaria. The purpose of this decision is to see if she is really interested in Him, and if she is, then she will ask more questions. The tragedy for many of us as Christians is that too often we go to one of two extremes when an interest is shown in our faith. Either we treat it as the Official Secrets Act and decline to say anything or we unload large quantities of (good) information on the unsuspecting person and kill the conversation. Jesus calls us to be *the salt of the earth* (Matthew 5:13), effective in small doses! In time Jesus will share a great deal of information with this lady about who he is and the nature of a true relationship with God, but he ensures that he engages her interest first at each stage of the conversation. The revelation of her marital history blows her away. But notice that the barriers are about to go up when the conversation becomes personal. Almost all of us by nature are sensitive about revealing personal information about things that have gone on in our lives. Sometimes it can be fear of

what others would think about our past mistakes or misfortune, but none of us likes feeling vulnerable in the presence of another person or people. At this stage she is feeling guilty at her past failures, but has forgotten that Jesus began the conversation with her some time ago while knowing all that information about her marital history. We need to be able to communicate clearly that God accepts people as they are and meets them where they are. It is a lie of the devil that a person needs to be as godly as an angel before they can be welcomed into his family. The gospel we share is one of grace to the undeserving – and that means all of us on a level together.

5. **Be positive and don't condemn people** (John 8:10-11)

¹⁰ *Jesus straightened up and asked her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?"* ¹¹ *"No one, sir," she said. "Then neither do I condemn you," Jesus declared. "Go now and leave your life of sin."* Although these words are taken from another passage in this gospel they reflect the attitude of Jesus to everyone he met. He was not in the condemnation business, unlike some people –sadly including some Christians. Only perfect people with halos firmly attached are entitled to dish out condemnation to the imperfect –yet the only one who qualifies –Jesus- made a point of never condemning anyone outside the faith. He had strong words to say about religious people (for example, in Matthew 23) who were hypocrites, but that was a different matter. There are a range of lifestyle choices that people in our communities engage in which Christians hopefully would see differently. However, we will not make an issue of these things because their real need is Jesus. When a person comes to faith in Christ they will see the need to address these things, in time, but we must leave that to the Holy Spirit to direct them about these issues, not attempt to be a moral policeman/woman for the wider community. I remember an older pastor (and a strong Temperance advocate) illustrating this to me about a conversation he had overheard between a publican and a Salvation Army lady. She was urging the man first to quit the drink trade and then trust Jesus. Quietly when that conversation had concluded, my friend went over to the girl and indicated that she had missed the point completely. The man was interested in Jesus, choosing to condemn his choice of occupation was missing the point when eternal issues were at stake. Too often today in our very secular world Christians can make a similar mistake. We need to focus on the most important issue or issues and be patient trusting the Holy Spirit to attend to lesser things. As any doctor would declare addressing the symptoms rather than a root cause of a problem is missing the point. When our acquaintance, friend or family member has still to come to faith their big need is Jesus, not addressing their heretosexual /homosexual or whatever lifestyle issues; nor the way they dress or socialise or use of illegal substances, or possibly unethical work practices. It can be a huge pressure within us to want to 'fix' someone else's symptoms of a life without Jesus, when we should be showing them unconditional love and acceptance with a view, in time, when they come to Christ, to helping them live a life that is pleasing to him.

6. **Keep in mind the main issues** (John 4:19-26)

¹⁹ *"Sir," the woman said, "I can see that you are a prophet.* ²⁰ *Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you Jews claim that the place where we must worship is in Jerusalem."* ²¹ *"Woman," Jesus replied, "believe me, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem.* ²² *You Samaritans worship what you do not know; we worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews.* ²³ *Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true*

worshippers will worship the Father in the Spirit and in truth, for they are the kind of worshippers the Father seeks. ²⁴ God is spirit, and His worshippers must worship in the Spirit and in truth.” ²⁵ The woman said, “I know that Messiah” (called Christ) “is coming. When He comes, He will explain everything to us.” ²⁶ Then Jesus declared, “I, the one speaking to you—I am He.” Avoid red herrings. The woman thought she had hit the jackpot with the issue raised in verses nineteen and twenty. This controversy had divided Jews and Samaritans for centuries. Which religious building should we worship in –on Mount Gerizim (the Samaritan Temple) or in Jerusalem at the Jewish place of worship. Or put in contemporary language: there are many different types of churches –which one is right? Or many different religions and religious buildings –which one would provide the best way to a relationship with God? Don’t go there... the issue primarily is about a relationship with Jesus as he explains in verses twenty-three and twenty-four. When a person has put their faith and trust in him then other issues, often, but not always, become considerably less important. The second red herring related to the Messiah (called the Taheb (Restorer) by the Samaritans). The Samaritans understood the Messiah as a teacher who would resolve all religious controversies. *The woman said, “I know that Messiah” (called Christ) “is coming. When He comes, He will explain everything to us.”* ²⁶ Then Jesus declared, “I, the one speaking to you—I am He.” Jesus avoided being distracted by secondary issues, we need to do so as well however tempting they may be! We need to ask God for wisdom to discern what is a real problem for someone and what is simply a device for erecting a barrier between us when the Holy Spirit is at work in someone’s life.

7. **Keep focussed on your primary purpose in life** (John 4:26-42)

²⁶ Then Jesus declared, “I, the one speaking to you—I am He.” ²⁷ Just then His disciples returned and were surprised to find Him talking with a woman. But no one asked, “What do you want?” or “Why are you talking with her?” ²⁸ Then, leaving her water jar, the woman went back to the town and said to the people, ²⁹ “Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did. Could this be the Messiah?” ³⁰ They came out of the town and made their way toward Him. ³¹ Meanwhile His disciples urged Him, “Rabbi, eat something.” ³² But He said to them, “I have food to eat that you know nothing about.” ³³ Then His disciples said to each other, “Could someone have brought Him food?” ³⁴ “My food,” said Jesus, “is to do the will of Him who sent me and to finish His work. ³⁵ Don’t you have a saying, ‘It’s still four months until harvest’? I tell you, open your eyes and look at the fields! They are ripe for harvest. ³⁶ Even now the one who reaps draws a wage and harvests a crop for eternal life, so that the sower and the reaper may be glad together. ³⁷ Thus the saying ‘One sows and another reaps’ is true. ³⁸ I sent you to reap what you have not worked for. Others have done the hard work, and you have reaped the benefits of their labour.” ³⁹ Many of the Samaritans from that town believed in Him because of the woman’s testimony, “He told me everything I ever did.” ⁴⁰ So when the Samaritans came to Him, they urged Him to stay with them, and He stayed two days. ⁴¹ And because of His words many more became believers. ⁴² They said to the woman, “We no longer believe just because of what you said; now we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this man really is the Saviour of the world.” By keeping focussed Jesus brought this lady to faith and through her testimony reached many other people in the village, who would never have engaged in a conversation with a Jew. Our text for the year is John 4:35: *You know the saying, ‘Four months between planting and harvest’ But I say, ‘walk up and look around. The fields are already ripe for harvest’* (NLV). Jesus’ point to the first disciples and to us is this – be prayerful maybe with another person or a prayer triplet, or prayer group; be expectant for opportunities to share your faith this year and trust that we will have great joy in seeing men and women and young people commit their lives to Christ, Amen.