The lectionary is very challenging. Sometimes it can be like buses – either you find yourself waiting for ever for something that really grabs you to preach on, or three fabulous readings turn up all at once. And then, of course, each reading encountered in a new context has new treasures which you haven’t seen before.

Today’s readings are fantastic. We haven’t even heard Exodus 17, about the grumbling, thirsty Israelites in the desert being grumpily cared for by God, who causes water to flow for them from the rocks at Meribah. And then we have Romans 5, with one of the richest progressions in scripture about how God leads us through struggle and hardship to a deeper, to a more enduring, faithful, character.

But one of the greatest jewels of scripture is the encounter in the fourth chapter of John’s gospel – the story of how an outsider is turned into a messenger – of how one who was excluded becomes the one to bring inclusion to others through her witness. It’s the story of how Jesus, travelling through the land of a despised people, comes across a woman who is herself despised – and lets her know that she is loved.

It’s interesting to put her alongside Nicodemus, the subject of last week’s gospel – he hid away from others during the night, as he had a reputation to protect. The woman, in contrast, had no reputation to protect – but she hides away in the bright light and heat of the day, when no-one else would draw water. (So we have two different sorts of hiding …)

John is helping us understand the universal significance of Jesus: in the encounter with Nicodemus, we learned that Jesus brings salvation even to the Jews, to the teachers of Israel – to those who considered themselves at the heart of acceptable religion. The heart, if you like, of the historical narrative. In this encounter in Samaria, we learn that Jesus brings salvation to those on the edge – polluted, unacceptable. The heretics.

The region of Samaria was part but not part of Israel – divided from it by troubled history. Something of the equivalent is found in the division within Israel Palestine today of Israel and the occupied Palestinian Territories. Some would see parallels in our own national history in Northern Ireland. 700 years earlier, when the country was conquered by alien invaders, and then re-patriated after the exile, the people of what had been the Northern Kingdom of Samaria did not completely disassociate themselves from the influences of the religious practices of their conquerors. So they found themselves in an anomalous position in relation to the rest of Israel – of things being ‘not quite right’ – neither one thing nor the other. This woman, and her people, were outsiders – quite unlike Nicodemus – but like him encountering Jesus outside the mainstream of society.

Jesus, however, comes to meet her. (Nicodemus had come to him by night – but Jesus goes to her.) She is approaching the well at a time when she can avoid the prying eyes, the gossiping tongues. But as she arrives, a man is already there – not just a man, but Jew (how did she know? His speech, dress, accent appearance?) And not only does he come to where she is, but, extraordinarily, he open the encounter by making himself vulnerable, by asking for help.

And so this encounter becomes a worked example for us as to how to engage with the outsider. What can we learn from this about how to reach out, from the cathedral, to those who are excluded and bring them
it the heart of ministry, witnesses to the gospel of reconciliation? Let’s just see how this encounter progresses:

Jesus asks her for a drink – she’s so shocked she responds quite boldly, to say ‘what’s going on here?’ Why are you asking me for help? Jesus then says – if you knew who you were talking to, you’d know just how strange this is ... and it seems that he is prepared to lay aside his original need in order to take the relationship deeper. Two side by side narratives continue for a while here – Jesus is talking about one thing, she is talking about another. It’s not clear whether the woman really knows what the conversation is about when she asks for the living water. But what started with Jesus asking for help is now moving towards the possibility that he might also have something to offer.

Jesus then takes the encounter into a deeper place of reality, of honesty. Here, as so often, John is relating a story full of symbolic significance. As Jesus leads her on in this conversation, she begins, it seems to trust him – or perhaps to realise that it’s no good trying to hide the truth from him. Just as he has made himself vulnerable with her, so she now makes herself vulnerable with him: “I have no husband”. Jesus’ response is surprising in the narrative. In fact, the reference to five husbands is seen by many as a reference to the five false gods, or religious practices, of the history of the Samaritan religion – so it is a truth both individual, and communal, a truth of personal and spiritual history.

This shift to deeper territory is perhaps threatening, and the woman initially responds with a distracting theological question. I find that personal challenge to faith or response can quite often be deflected by a genuine, but somewhat irrelevant question. Jesus takes the question and uses it to lead to a deeper question still, about where truth is to be found, where Spirit and truth come together – in Jesus himself.

And this leads to one of the most remarkable exchanges, which demonstrate the profound movement that has taken place in the woman. She has found – perhaps for the first time in her life – acceptance. So much so that when the disciples return the appearance of the two together prevents them from challenging any impropriety. I’m reminded of a wonderful statement of faith by Maureen, a member of Ricarda’s church in Gloucester who died earlier this month. She had not long been coming to church, and was confirmed in old age. She was asked to give her testimony at the confirmation, and it was striking: ‘Well, when I came to church no-one asked ‘what the bloody hell are you doing here – so I came back’. The woman at the well had quickly moved from outsider to evangelist – and so she goes, incredibly, back into the village, waking people from their siestas to declare ‘come and meet a man who told me everything I have ever done’. Do you see the irony? She had been at the well at noon exactly to 

avoid people telling her what she had done – and now she was celebrating it. Why? Because this time truth was told with acceptance, with an invitation to join in, with a request for help.

This is the encounter that starts with a ‘yes’ and explores what it might mean – and not a ‘no’ which sets conditions to a relationship. It sets a pattern for us here in a cathedral, to start with a vulnerable, generous, yes – rather than a defended and defensive ‘no’ (which is all too easy here what might be called the acceptable heart of religion.)

This is the message of reconciliation. This is the message that says, let’s talk about your story, and help you realise that no-one is excluded from the kingdom of God. Let’s find you a part to play. And because of the truth of the story, many came to see for themselves, and found faith.

We find the same story echoed in our own three fold commitment of the CCN: healing the wounds of history; learning to live with difference and to celebrate diversity; building a culture of peace.

This is our agenda: to help people tell truth, to show acceptance, to demonstrate that no-one is excluded from the Kingdom of God. This is our ministry, and this is our life.