

Reaching out across cultural norms

We live in a culturally diverse world with the diversity of cultures intermixing more than any time in history. In the past people from different cultures kept to their part of the world – some by choice and other forced to do so. Internationally there is a mass migration of people taking place with people immigrating to other countries, refugees fleeing to other countries or for whatever other reason. Countries that were predominantly mono-cultural are now multicultural. The USA may get its first non white president at the next elections for the first time in the history of the USA. Then within nations where various cultural and racial groups were confined to particular areas of the nation are now free to live wherever they want. In the South African context the whites lived amongst whites, the Indians amongst Indians and the blacks amongst blacks. But this has changed with a racial and cultural migration within the nation that is seeing a diversity of race and culture within any particular suburb. This is good but we need to understand one another to get along. We also need to see that it is not only the cross cultural missionary who prepares himself to go to another country who has to learn to work cross culturally. The whole church has to learn, not only to work cross culturally, but to live in a cross cultural environment.

Even though the cultural diversity in any particular place is more today than ever before that doesn't mean that there wasn't any cultural diversity that needed to be dealt with before. Jesus dealt with Jews, Romans, Samaritans and Canaanites.

John 4: 1 – 30, 39 – 42

1) Breaking cultural norms

- Empowering leadership (vs. 1 – 3)
 - In many cultures today the main leader does everything and is authoritarian in their leadership styles.
 - This was the prevalent leadership style in the time of Jesus, but Jesus went contrary to cultural norms in developing leaders and served his disciples and allowed them to minister and baptize – something only a Rabbi should have done at that time.
 - *Matthew 10: 42 - 44* Jesus called them together and said, "You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all.
 - A good leader has only led when he has empowered others to take over from him.
 - The world cannot be reached for Christ by "Lone Rangers". A minister of the Gospel who tries to do everything himself and fails to raise others up alongside himself will only succeed in the short term while he is around. After he is gone his ministry will fall apart.
- Jesus spoke to a woman (v. 7)
 - In the culture of Jesus day men would not talk to a man in public – especially someone who they didn't know – and women should not talk to a man in public.
 - *John 4:27* 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?"
 - The disciples didn't ask these questions but the fact that it is stated that they didn't ask those questions shows that Jesus wasn't doing something that is culturally acceptable.
 - Where the culture dishonoured women who looked down on women as being less than men Jesus, in doing this, showed his respect to women as being equal to a man.
 - It wasn't the woman who initiated the conversation but Jesus had asked her for water to drink. Jesus was opening up the opportunity to minister to her.
 - If Jesus had stuck to his cultural norms he would have just seen her as a woman doing her required chores and someone who could meet his needs.
 - But, rather Jesus saw her as someone who had needs of her own and some who he needed to minister to.
 - When he asked for water to drink he offered her water that would become a spring welling up to eternal life.

- Jesus spoke to a Samaritan (v. 9)
 - Not only was she a woman but she was a Samaritan woman and Jews and Samaritans did not associate with each other.
 - The disciples still hadn't learnt this lesson of how Jesus viewed all people. Even after Pentecost when the disciples had been filled with the Holy Spirit and led thousands of people to faith in Jesus they still had a hard time accepting that Peter had gone into a home of Cornelius – a Gentile (which against Jewish customs) – and shared the Gospel with them.
 - We are often so busy hankering over racial and cultural differences that we cannot see what God wants to do in people's lives.
 - A person who says things like “we shouldn't worry about culture but just preach the Gospel” is really saying we need to do it our way and if they can't fit into my cultural way of thinking then tough, they must simply lose out. It says that “my culture is the only right one and everyone else needs to change to accommodate me.”
 - That is pride speaking!
 - Jesus was willing to let go of his cultural norms to touch others of a different culture.

2) Taking opportunities to minister Christ to people

- Touch a person personally and not merely culturally or socially (vs. 16 – 19)
 - Jesus saw into her life and raised the issue of her husband
 - She was a woman who was living a loose, immoral lifestyle.
 - Jesus never condemned her. The fact that he raised her sin would have brought sufficient guilt and shame on her. He didn't have to rub it in. He rather dealt with her with a lot of grace.
 - It is so easy to just see the outside of people that we don't get to the heart of what is really an issue for them – an area of their lives where they need to be set free or something that they are ashamed of or feeling guilty over and need grace and forgiveness.
 - The Gospel is general for everyone but is also very personal to each one of us.
 - It is what is how Jesus touches us what makes it good news to us.
- Don't get led into side issue disputes – point to true worship of God (vs. 20 – 26)
 - When we start touching people they often raise other issues to side track us so avoid an uncomfortable topic in their lives.
 - Here the woman raised the issue of the Samaritans worshiping on Mount Gerizim because that is where Abraham and Jacob had built altars. The Samaritans had built a temple there in about 400BC which the Jews destroyed in about 128BC. Thus there was some hostility between the Jews and the Samaritans.
 - Jesus didn't argue about the issue that had divided Jews and Samaritans for so long. He rather pointed to what God really expects of everyone – Jews and Samaritan and Gentile all alike – to worship God in Spirit and in truth.
 - The Gospel pervades every culture and true worship is more than the worship according to what our culture and tradition say it is. Worship is a personal matter that comes from deep within – from our spirit reaching up and touching the heart of God.
 - If we only look at the outer dynamics of worship then we have missed the heart of worship altogether.
 - Jesus didn't insist on dealing with the woman's moral issue. When He revealed himself to her that was enough for her to believe and repent.
 - People don't repent when they have not had a real personal encounter with Jesus.

3) The testimony of a person who has encountered Jesus personally is powerful

- The woman went back to her village and told everyone about her encounter with Jesus and many believed. (v.39)
- They then moved from believing because of her testimony to having a personal encounter with Jesus themselves. (v. 42)
- How strong is your testimony? Will other believe because of your personal encounter with Jesus?
- Or do you only have a traditional cultural encounter – this is what my family before me always did.
- Are you able to reach across cultural barriers and norms to touch someone else's life?