

Intimacy is a curious subject for a sermon in this day and age, to be sure. I wonder whether we agree even on what intimacy is.

Intimacy is a something marked by close acquaintance, association or familiarity: it relates to our innermost nature; sometimes intimacy might be described as the true touching of souls.

I believe that in our world the greatest intimacy is that to be found between a wife and her husband. However, I am not talking of what much of the world sees as the be-all and end-all of relationships between man and woman, but about something else.

Somebody was talking me recently about the time after the death of her husband. After a while, she was used to the fact that he was not there, though of course this still hurt.

What she missed the most was that when she came home, there was nobody to whom she might say "You'll never guess who I met in town..." or "You wouldn't believe what they've done to..." and that is the sort of intimacy I am talking about this morning.

Of course we will be able to share intimacy with those we have known for years. In those circumstances, these are shared experiences, experienced in the same places and at the same times, and it is those shared experiences that unite us.

There is another form of intimacy that we might come across. This is the sort that occurs when meeting a stranger who has already some experiences we can share from what we have done or known.

If I meet somebody who shares my interests or has been

to some of the same places as me, then straight away there is a bond. There is a bond, even if the perspectives from which we knew something are completely different.

I love to talk to people who can talk about Vanuatu, or about the music of Bob Dylan, about the opportunities and problems of being a father, about people I have known or about any of the many things that interest me.

Most of all, I have the chance to talk to people about the things of God. Some are very frightened by the idea of sharing anything about their faith with others.

"Faith is a very personal thing," I hear "and so I couldn't possibly talk to anybody about what I believe." I quietly wonder what would happen if all the Christians in the world took that line. Christianity would surely be dead in one generation. And again "They don't want to hear about God." Maybe they don't, but if you never give them the chance, you'll never find out.

Let us look at the Gospel reading we have just heard. Jesus meets the woman at the well, but he does not start off by saying anything spiritual. Quite the reverse, in fact. His first question is "Will you give me a drink?" and I don't see that as a threatening question. She did. She was a Samaritan woman, He was a Jewish man, and those two had very little in common in many ways. Jews didn't have anything to do with Samaritans, and Samaritans didn't have so much to do with Jews either.

Yet they had so much to share! She knew a lot about her faith and her people so she started off straight away: "You! A Jewish man wanting a drink from me, a Samaritan woman!" That was all. Jesus took the opportunity and said "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."

What kind of a comment is this? Maybe she understood what Jesus meant, maybe she didn't, but whichever, her answer seemed to change the subject. "Well, then, where's your bucket? Are you greater than Jacob, who gave us this well, and drank from it, as did his animals and his descendants?"

They're really going at it now. "Drink from this well, and you'll be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give will never thirst: but the water will become a spring of water welling up to eternal life."

That sounds pretty good. Drink this and you'll never be thirsty again. Do you remember the story about the magic porridge pot that gave you as much as you wanted whenever you said "Cook, little pot, cook"? Well, the woman must have heard something like it, because she wanted some of this magic water Jesus was talking about.

There's a point you can't get past and that's where we get to now. Jesus has known all about this woman since they met, but it's only now that he gets to some real detail. There she is, drawing water from the well in the middle of the day, with the sun high in the sky beating down on them when most people collect their water at dawn or dusk. Why?

"Go and fetch your husband."

"I haven't got a husband."

"You are right when you say 'I haven't got a husband.' The fact of the matter is, you've had five, and the man you are with now isn't your husband."

Oh dear. We've been getting to know each other quite well, you know lots about our history and religion, and you've spoilt it. Let's see what we can salvage.

"I see you're a prophet. That means you might be able to

ask a theoretical question. Our fathers worshipped on that mountain over there, but you Jews say the place to worship is Jerusalem."

Jesus answers the question and continues to tell of the worship that is to come, not on the hill or in Jerusalem. God is spirit, and his worshippers must worship in spirit and in truth.

This is getting a bit much. So she says "I know that the Messiah is coming. When he comes, he will explain everything to us."

Then Jesus declared: "I who speak to you am he."

This foreign woman, with such doubtful morals that she goes to draw water when nobody's about to point her out or talk about her, is the first person to whom Jesus reveals who he is.

That is surely true intimacy.

A parable from a national game:

This was a vivid picture at the time, and I am sure you will see it most weekends somewhere, but there was one time when it struck me. The batsman played the ball and called for the run. It seemed good, but one of the men in the outfield was quicker than either of them expected, and his throw to the wicket was right on. Now, one of the batsmen was weaker than the other, and as he saw what was happening, he ran as fast as he could so that he was run out, and so that his team-mate, handier with the bat, could carry on to make a good total. This is a picture of the message of St Paul in verse 7 of Romans 5, "Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die."

That's only a very small picture of what it is really like to die for somebody. You and I know that it is at times near

to death that we have times of great intimacy, both with the person who is dying and with others with whom we share the waiting and the grief. The cynic has written "You never hear a man on his deathbed wishing that he had spent more time at the office." and this is surely true.

So we have a friend who has died, and who is with us now, and who has shared all that we can possibly know and feel.

Very simply, whoever we are, whatever we have done, Jesus is our friend, the closest friend we can ever know, and who will never leave us, betray us or let us down in any way at all.

St Paul wrote: "God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us".

Let us pray. *Dear Lord, we thank you that when we come to you, we come to you as friends coming to our most intimate friends. We thank you that while we were sinners, you died for us. Help us to live as you lived, to act as you acted and to speak your words when the time is right to speak them.*

Amen.