

Lent 3

Say Sorry Reflection based on Sam Well's book *Love Mercy*

John 4: 5-42 The Woman At The Well

I am surprised at how our Lenten Gospels are lending themselves to the lens of Loving Mercy!

Today I will take us through Rev Well's thoughts on apology before I turn to the gospel.

What turns an emerging truthful story into a new form of action and reaction is an apology.

A form of words that expresses both acknowledgement of responsibility, without resorting to mitigating excuses and genuine sorrow. Not simply for significant hurt and irreplaceable damage. Often an apology is needed on both sides.

Five key terms to be noted. Acknowledgement of responsibility. I regret that you were offended it not an apology. It should not be offset by excuses. There must be a full and plausible account of the story.

All parties have to take a step of trust. 'I did it and will make every effort to ensure I will never do it again.' No mitigating excuses.

Expressing sorrow can be easily turned into a form of manipulation. A passive-aggressive assertion 'I said I was sorry!' Sorry is a magic word that dismantles all accusations and disarms all fury. You may need to use it over and over again for it to work.

It can be used as a smokescreen behind which hard words are uttered. It can be a defence mechanism in the face of rising tension.

Sorry can't achieve everything. There is no real apology until there is a genuine appetite for understanding. Knowledge without understanding is little more than fuel for further conflagration.

Saying I did it, I am not doing it anymore and I have no intention or desire to do it again builds a bridge from combat to peace. Once this is in place there is a bridge for both parties to walk over.

Harm comes in three forms. Hurt, can have long-lasting effects. Pain can have abiding and constant discomfort at things profoundly wrong and terribly misshapen and can lead to nightmares, sleep loss, flashbacks, panic attacks.

Beyond hurt is damage, this may be to persons or property. Damage means death. Things can never be the same.

A third harm is malice. This is malevolent will, this may be actively pursued.

‘Everything in me wanted to kill you and I took pride in the damage I did’. This is not the same as sorry. The aggrieved party may have to accept a more superficial apology for an interim period, but such a statement follows on from telling a truthful story to accept, fully and finally that the story wasn’t just unfortunate. It was willed and deliberate.

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It is well to say sorry but penance shows the degree of awareness of the damage inflicted. The point is not to aspire to full restitution. That may risk self-delusion that one can expunge one’s guilt by tangible payment. Instead, the intention is to demonstrate to the victim that one understands the quality of what has been lost. Penance is a gesture, not a due.

A constructive act of penance is to show what you have learned about the people you have wronged (for example holocaust museums). It is common for countries to erect monuments to fallen soldiers. An act of penance is to erect a memorial that fosters the qualities of those who lost their lives on the other side.

This act of penance in all its inadequacy and potential for good but also for self-deception. It is a warning to perpetrators that poignant gestures don't erase crimes. This is only step 5 the journey is not yet done!

With these thoughts in mind, I turn to the gospel. Jesus confronts an alien woman to ask for water. Jews and Samaritans don't fraternize so she is bemused. What is the power differential here? Who has the upper hand? There is challenge in the encounter. She asks if he is greater than her ancestor Jacob. He understates his authority: 'if you knew who asked you for water you would have asked Him and He would have given you living water'.

In this exchange is embedded in his knowledge of her situation and her need of reconciliation to herself. Jesus knows she has had multiple husbands and the man she is currently living with is not her husband either. She perceives he is a prophet and she goes to the town to spread the word about the man who has told her of everything she had ever done.

There is no blame on Jesus' part. There is invitation. Would she like to drink of the living-water? In Jesus we have a model for deep peace and reconciliation. He is not concerned with punishing the woman and he reaches across the divide of racial and cultural difference. He is focused on breaching the gap between prescriptive rules; don't mix with foreigners, don't transgress purity regulations in sexual interaction. He builds the bridge that will enable new learning. The hour is coming...She must use her imagination to envisage new possibilities. Jesus says the hour is coming when you will neither worship in this place or Jerusalem. The true worshipers will worship in the Father in spirit and truth. For the Father is seeking such worship. She says to Jesus 'I know the messiah is coming (who is called the Christ)'. Here is an interaction of honesty on Jesus' part and trust on the part of the woman.

In term's of the Well's model, a truth-story has been told both on both sides. Jesus says of the messiah; 'I am he.' Here is revelation.

When the woman went to the townsfolk and told them Jesus had told her everything she ever did. So the Samaritans go to Jesus and they conclude we believe not because of what you have told us but because we heard for ourselves and know that this is indeed the Christ, the Saviour of the world.

Honesty and trust create new insight.

Thanks be to God.

Reference

Wells, S. *Love Mercy* Canterbury Press 2020 passim.