



14 November 2010  
Remembrance Sunday  
Choral Evensong  
Genesis 18 vv. 1–8  
John 4 vv. 5–24

## Meetings

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Given that I've been tasked with contributing to a Rough Guide to Life, I feel a bit as though I've been thrust into the role of the proverbial wise old woman, And I suppose it is not altogether inappropriate given that having slipped past the biblical span of threescore years and ten, I'm already living on borrowed time. So here goes: let's talk about **Meetings**.

Meetings must be one of the most frequent and obvious features of life: casual meetings and arranged meetings, anticipated meetings and unexpected meetings, meetings dreaded and meetings hoped for, meetings symbolic, meetings contrived, meetings to be avoided at all costs, trivial passings in the night, and meetings that prove to be deeply significant, sometimes only by hindsight. Like many another University student, I was introduced to my husband-to-be here in Cambridge by a match-making friend—and in retrospect, after nearly 50 years, I have to say it was a heaven-sent meeting!

Talking of University, there's no better place to meet people, and now even more than in my day, to meet people who really are different, from all over the world and many different cultural backgrounds. This wise old woman would say: Take advantage of it. There's no better way, not just to open up horizons, but to gain self-knowledge. I suppose it's a bit of a post-modern cliché, but it's still true, that you discover your own identity through genuinely meeting and attending to the 'other', the stranger, through crossing boundaries and leaving your comfort zone.

The story we read from the Gospel is doubly a boundary-crossing narrative. It wasn't exactly conventional for a man to accost a woman in a public place, as Jesus did, and what's more, as explained, Jews and Samaritans were mutually suspicious, and despite their common heritage in the books of Moses, faced each other with certain taboos – refusing to share cups or eat together since they regarded each other as unclean (in other words they were not all that unlike those Christian churches who refuse each other Eucharistic hospitality). Yet despite all that, Jesus had asked **her** for a **drink**.  
Doubly boundary-crossing!

Boundary-crossing meetings are always nerve-racking. Yet it's from such meetings that lives are changed. We can only guess how the Samaritan woman's life changed after meeting Jesus, yet with her less than perfect past exposed, and against all convention, she rushes off to gather all her neighbours and her testimony led many Samaritans to believe, we're told. Her life can't have stayed the same!

Last Sunday I was preaching at another St. John's—a Methodist church in Smethwick, without a choir or an organist, a majority black congregation in what was once the constituency of the notorious racist politician, Enoch Powell. And as so often before, I found myself deeply humbled by the extraordinary faith and courage of, now aging, black West Indian immigrants—some with their British-born children and grandchildren, though they, like everyone else in our present post-Christian culture, find it hard to pass on the church-going habit to the next generations. I acknowledge a profound debt, over many years, to meetings with such people, to their deep testimony to the presence of God among them, their sheer trust in God against all the odds.

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So don't avoid meetings that are challenging – possibly even threatening – meetings that take you onto unfamiliar territory, where you don't feel altogether at ease. This wise old woman says – they're really worth it!

But now, let's go back the other story we read from the Bible. It's a story of desert hospitality, reflecting traditional custom and practice among nomads in the arid regions of the Middle East. Encamped by the oaks of Mamre, Abraham receives three travellers, hurries out to welcome them, sees their dusty feet washed and food prepared.

The Epistle to the Hebrews seems to be referring to this story when it urges its readers not to neglect to show hospitality since by doing this some have entertained angels unawares (Heb. 13.2). Of course, the word 'angel' means 'messenger', and if we were to read on beyond verse 8 we would find that these three strangers had an important message to deliver: they said that when they returned in a year's time, Abraham and his wife Sarah would have a son. We're told that Sarah overheard, and given that both were very old and she herself well past child-bearing age, she laughed. Then we read, 'The Lord said to Abraham, 'Why did Sarah laugh and say, "Can I really have a child now that I'm so old?"' When the message is re-confirmed, Sarah's scared; and she lies, claiming she didn't laugh, but he (presumably the Lord) said, 'Oh yes, you did laugh'. Then the men set off and Abraham went with them to set them on their way.

So what is the relationship between the three strangers and the Lord? The same strange shift occurred at the beginning of the story – did you notice it when it was read? The Lord appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre, it said; and he looked up and saw three men standing by. The early Church interpreted this story as a revelation of the Trinity, a fact captured in the traditional Russian icon of the Trinity – you may be familiar with Rublev's famous rendition of this: it is actually a depiction of the three strangers Abraham entertained, but with this deep ambiguity of reference. Be that as it may, the story is clearly about three men, strangers with a message, and yet it God who is discerned as present in the visit and God who is addressing Abraham.

Now this is surely parallel to the story in the Gospel. It's Jesus the Jew who accosts the Samaritan woman, and yet, is it just two human beings crossing boundaries? John's Gospel as a whole surely suggests that's there more going on here. Explicitly, in this story, the person the woman meets is at least God's Messiah. Implicitly, in context, it's God's very own Word who's addressing the woman.

Both of these biblical meetings are, on the face of it, with ordinary human beings, and yet there's an extraordinary dimension to each. Should we expect meetings like that? If not, why not? But how would we know it? Do we miss it because we don't expect it?

Permit me to end with some personal testimony – for this wise old woman comes from the Methodist tradition where testimony used to be part of the culture. I once started a sermon with the words, 'I met God in the Raddlebarn Road'. Yes, putting it like that was meant to startle people. I actually met an old priest who'd obviously had a stroke, limping along with a limp arm on the same side. And OK maybe it was reflective hindsight that made me put it like that. But given the circumstances, it still lifted my spirits at the time.

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Let me explain.

For some years I'd been struggling to hang onto faith in God after my first son, Arthur, was born with profound disabilities. I'd gone on taking my children to church each Sunday, and he'd simply gone on going to the crèche, since there was no way he could learn anything in Sunday school. I'd just had a visit from the minister who tried gently to say that now he was so big, and could be noisy, people thought he shouldn't be there disturbing the babies and toddlers. My head knew this was reasonable; my heart felt the church was rejecting my son. I was pushing Arthur up to the local shops in his buggy and passing the Catholic church when that old priest hobbled up to us, stopped, spoke to Arthur and then to me. It was simple act of unconditional acceptance. I met God in the Raddlebarn Road, and some time later, a way was found for Arthur still to come to my own church and be cared for.

Without that meeting, and other significant meetings over the years, I would not be standing here speaking as an ordained minister. As it puts it in the Bible, let those with ears to hear, hear. Amen.