

# THE PLEASURE OF BEING TORN APART:

a sermon praught by the Rev'd Dr Richard Major  
to the Anglican church in Zagreb  
(meeting at St Joseph's Chapel, in the Jesuit seminary of the Immaculate Heart of Mary),  
for Lent III, 27<sup>th</sup> March, 2011.

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Exodus xvii<sup>1-7</sup>; Psalm xcvi; Romans v<sup>1-11</sup>; John iv<sup>5-42</sup>.  
From the Gospel:



*Come and see a Man who told me  
everything I have ever done!*

In the Name of God,  
Father, Son and Holy Ghost:  
Amen.

## The Holy Gospel

(NRSV)

**H**E CAME TO A SAMARITAN CITY CALLED SYCHAR, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. Jacob's well was there, and JESUS, tired out by His journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon.

A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and JESUS said to her, 'Give Me a drink'. (His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.) The Samaritan woman said to Him, 'How is it that You, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?' (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.) JESUS answered her, 'If you knew the gift of God, and Who it is that is saying to you, "Give Me a drink", you would have asked Him, and He would have given you living water.' The woman said to Him, 'Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?' JESUS said to her, 'Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.' The woman said to Him, 'Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water.'

JESUS said to her, 'Go, call your husband, and come back.' The woman answered Him, 'I have no husband.' JESUS said to her, 'You are right in saying, "I have no husband"; for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!' The woman said to Him, 'Sir, I see that you are a prophet. Our ancestors worshipped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem.' JESUS said to her, 'Woman, believe Me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship Him. God is spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth.' The woman said to Him, 'I know that Messiah is coming' (who is called Christ). 'When He comes, He will proclaim all things to us.' JESUS said to her, 'I am He, the one who is speaking to you.'

Just then His disciples came. They were astonished that He was speaking with a woman, but no one said, 'What do You want?' or, 'Why are You speaking with her?' Then the woman left her water-jar and went back to the city. She said to the people, 'Come and see a Man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can He?' They left the city and were on their way to Him.

Meanwhile the disciples were urging Him, 'Rabbi, eat something.' But He said to them, 'I have food to eat that you do not know about.' So the disciples said to one another, 'Surely no one has brought Him something to eat?' JESUS said to them, 'My food is to do the will of Him who sent Me and to complete His work. Do you not say, "Four months more, then comes the harvest"? But I tell you, look around you, and see how the fields are ripe for harvesting. The reaper is already receiving wages and is gathering fruit for eternal life, so that sower and reaper may rejoice together. For here the saying holds true, "One sows and another reaps." I sent you to reap that for which you did not

labour. Others have laboured, and you have entered into their labour.'

Many Samaritans from that city believed in Him because of the woman's testimony, 'He told me everything I have ever done.' So when the Samaritans came to Him, they asked Him to stay with them; and He stayed there for two days. And many more believed because of His word. They said to the woman, 'It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that This is truly the Saviour of the world.'



☞ Giovanni Francesco Barbieri, known as Guercino, squinter, because he was cross-eyed, *JESUS and the Samaritan Woman at the Well*, an oil (1640-41) now in the Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid.

☞ Eric Gill, *The Last Judgement*, a small woodcut of 1929, yours for £65 at [http://rockinghamgallery.co.uk/Artist Pages/Gill/rockingham\\_gallery\\_eric\\_gill\\_wood\\_engraving\\_1929\\_31.the\\_last\\_judgement\\_douglas\\_cleverdon.htm](http://rockinghamgallery.co.uk/Artist Pages/Gill/rockingham_gallery_eric_gill_wood_engraving_1929_31_the_last_judgement_douglas_cleverdon.htm)



ET'S BEGIN WITH A NIGHTMARE. It's a useful nightmare to think about, because it's a nightmare we all, I imagine, have. Also, unlike most nightmares, it is important; it's important because, unlike most nightmare, it's true. It's what's really going to happen to us.

I mean, of course, the Last Judgement. The Christian imagination is haunted by the following picture: at the end of time, when the world is over, Christ sits enthroned, and I have no choice but to approach Him. He looks at me, and sees me: sees through me: sees me as I actually am, sees with perfect knowledge everything I have done, everything I should have done and didn't do, everything I pretend to be and am not. The entire dingy mess of my life will lie revealed in that glance. And I shall have no choice but to share that knowledge. I shall know myself even as I am known.<sup>1</sup>

All our lives we assume that the whole truth about ourselves would be too much to bear. It is necessary to veil certain motives, bury this monstrous fantasy or that, leave certain incidents in murky corners. Now, at the end of all things, all evasions are annihilated. The whole of us is flooded with nightmarish brightness.

[I say this nightmare is going to come true: but we have to be clear what we mean by that. There will a final judgement on us each, but there is, of course, no question for the Christian of condemnation or punishment. That can't happen. Law, guilt, death: we are beyond all that. Those things were washed away in the waters of our baptism. There is no condemnation now for us, who are incorporated into Christ.<sup>2</sup> However harrowing it may be to confront Him, and be entirely known, and entirely know ourselves, it is only a prelude to purgation, and then entry into everlasting happiness.

Yes; but that's not quite a consolation. We can imagine how drastic it will be, even on the brink of paradise, to be entirely known, and to know ourselves as Christ knows us. It will be like being torn apart, torn apart not with pincers, but as by solid beams of light, when all the private places of our minds will be flung open.

Imagine looking out the window of an aeroplane on a cloudless, breezy day in spring. The wind buffets the trees back and forth so you see to the roots, it prises the bushes apart, it whips up the surface of the waters, it tears aside smoke and vapour. You behold the contours of the land, its secret folds. Your eye follows the track of every creek, it makes out the outline of vanished barns in the fields. There is no possible hiding place, absolutely everything is revealed. And you, from your plane window, human though you be, see it all.

Well, that is the sort of knowledge Christ has of you. [Because He is God, He is omniscient, all-knowing – of course. God holds the supernovas in His hands, He regards the quivering back

<sup>1</sup> I Corinthians xiii<sup>12</sup>.

<sup>2</sup> Romans viii<sup>1</sup>.

and forth of every electron, He has total knowledge of everything. That's so obvious it's not particularly interesting. He is, after all, God. But JESUS Christ, remember, is human as well. He is a human being in exactly the same way you are. And this Man knows everything about you as another person might know it. Christ walked the earth, and knows what a filthy motive is like, what a spasm of resentment looks like as it crosses a human, how a lie smells. He knows it not just as God knows, but as you and I know it, as any man would know it. And what are we to say of the shame of such disclosure?

The Judgement of Christ is the theme and terror of Advent. But Christ's judgement is also the point of Lent. For we cannot make much progress with ourselves until we understand ourselves. And we cannot understand ourselves until we go into the Wilderness to confront the truth: the wearisome or even horrific knowledge of ourselves as we are – the knowledge Christ has of us.



SO HERE WE ARE in the middle of Lent, and what our Gospel gives us this evening is a picture, a preview of the Judgement of Christ.

No, it's more than that: it's a parody of the Last Judgement, it's a skit on the Last Judgement. Myself, I wouldn't dare offer such picture. But the New Testament is the most audacious book in the world. There's nothing it shrinks from. It is prepared to show us what the Last Judgement will be like – and the strange thing is that when we have seen, the horror evaporates, the nightmare ends. The Judgement of Christ is a fact; but it isn't, after all, a nightmare.

What is it like, if it's not nightmare? Well, that's one of the great astonishments of the Gospel story.



HERE WE HAVE IT, then, the moment of divine judgement. Christ sits waiting. The sinful soul approaches.

Only things don't go as we'd expect. Christ is not seated in majesty as cosmic king, surrounded by the hosts of eternity. To look at He's just a youngish Man in a linen tunic, slumped on a stone bench in the shade of a stunted olive tree, just outside a sleepy village in the middle of nowhere, beside a well. It's the blazing noon of a hot day on the sunny side of the Mediterranean. The light is metallic. There's not a touch of wind. Behind the clamour of the cicadas is a hard dry intense silence.

Christ is absolutely alone. His entourage went into the village to buy things for lunch. He was too exhausted to go with them. We meet Him pale with the heat, tired and rather wry. The famous great brown eyes are watching from under the linen folds of His hood.

What He is watching is a woman approaching the well with a clay pitcher. As in every village in Asia, the big chore of the day is fetching water. This well's quite famous, as it happens, with

thousands of years of history behind it; but it looks like any other well, and she looks like any other well-preserved provincial lady – except that's she's absolutely alone, too. Fetching water is a social activity, but this woman is evidently a pariah. She comes out to get her water at the unfashionable hour of noon, when none of her neighbours is about.

The judge of the living and the dead is waiting for her. His great brown eyes rest on her and see through her – through that flirtatious, rather pathetic veil of scarlet gauze, past her chunky bangles and anklets, past the showy henna on her hands and the careful ringlets. Here is the classic village floosie, the hot young thing of sixteen who has turned thirty-five, warmed over and despised. The cosmic judge sees through her and He says – ‘Give Me a drink’.

A friendly remark, in fact. A startlingly friendly remark. The woman almost drops her pitcher. Then she looks at Him. Then she speaks. The two of them have a conversation, a free-wheeling conversation on politics, and religion, and the Jewish Question, and the Samaritan Question, and water, and Jacob and Joseph, and husbands. What we have in John's Gospel, obviously, is just a summary of the things they touched on, but even in the summary we catch that note of easy respect and candour – of friendliness.

You'll have noticed that it's an unusually long Gospel this evening. But it wasn't, I think, boring. Most Gospel stories are short, just bald anecdotes. But the story of the Woman at the Well is expansive. Choruses come and go, villagers, disciples, commenting on the action. Characters make exits and entrances. It's like a play – it's like the sketch of an opera – no, it's like a stage comedy. The comic element is, of course, provided by Christ's disciples, who return from the village with the picnic supplies and are gobsmacked to find what their Master has been up to in their absence. It's impossible to list all the taboos Christ is breaking. A man doesn't normally speak to a woman he doesn't know. A rabbi doesn't speak to lone women at all. No respectable man speaks to a disreputable woman like this, anywhere, ever. Worse still: a Jew doesn't speak to a Samaritan if he can help it. Above all, a Jew never touches or share things with a Samaritan. Samaritans are hateful. To accept water from a Samaritan's pitcher is an enormity almost beyond words. Imagine if we spied the Cardinal-Archbishop of Zagreb chatting uproarously to a Gypsy prostitute with a neck tattoo who is clearly dealing heroin, sharing her cigarette. The disciples' surprise is that great.

However, they know their Man. They know better than to risk asking ‘Why are You speaking with *her*?’ Christ is pure love, and love sometimes explodes. The woman trots off excitedly to tell everyone about her Friend. The disciples lay out their picnic, and by the time lunch is over a delegation of villagers has come out, inviting the whole party to stay for a few days. To stay in a Samaritan village! The disciples keep their faces out of sight while Christ smiles, and says Yes.



HE TORE HER APART. “He told me everything I have ever done”, she declared. He knew about the six husbands – well, the five-and-a-half husbands, the present half not quite counting. He knew about her loneliness, her weariness at trudging out of town alone to draw water. He knew about her neat little political orthodoxies. (Loose women are often politically orthodox.) When she tried to rattle off the usual formula, *We Samaritans use a temple-on-Mount-Shechem-but-you-Jews-have-a-temple-on-Mount-Zion*, Christ waved it off. He blew all that sectarian nonsense away like a stiff breeze. He parted the foliage to seize on the roots of faith. *True worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth*. He knew about her longing for truth. He laid all that open, along with her every sin.

He tore her apart and yet she loved Him. For it was not a nightmarish experience standing before Christ and finding that He knew everything. She warmed to Him. He set her free.

What we keep forgetting about Christ is His friendliness. I don’t just mean His love. The infinite love of God is a dazzling concept. I’m not always sure what it means. I mean Christ’s human friendliness. It’s what struck people at the time. His way of speaking is remarkably matey (*Which of you shall have a friend, and shall go unto him at midnight, and say unto him, Friend, lend me three loaves ...*)<sup>3</sup> His manners were amazingly affable. The Pharisees, who were not friendly, remarked on it, and didn’t like it – *behold*, they growled, *a friend of prostitutes and quislings*.<sup>4</sup> And they were quite right. Christ did not just love, He actually liked the company of notorious evil-doers. He does not just love, He actually likes the company of you and me. When we have to do with Christ, we have to do both with the judge of the universe, and with a companion.

This is Lent. Everything we have ever heard about the ghastliness of sin is true. Everything we have ever thought about the seriousness of judgement is true. And yet judgement is not a nightmare. It is a joy and a release.

Christ sees through and through us; His knowledge takes us apart. But it a healthy tearing, wielded by a friend and ally. Between us, Christ and we are remaking ourselves. When we are finished, we shall be perfect. That is the promise of Lent. We shall be judged; more, the judgement is happening, even now. Christ is the Man Who tells us everything we have ever done, and are, and might be. At this moment His eyes penetrate you and me, and He shares His great and terrifying knowledge with us; and so, in grief and rapture, we are re-created.

**To Him, therefore, with the Father and the Holy Ghost ever One,  
be glory and honour now, and in the ages of ages: Amen.**

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<sup>3</sup> Luke xi<sup>5</sup>.

<sup>4</sup> Matthew xi<sup>19</sup>.



## The Samaritans

were living in Palestine when the Hebrew elite returned from exile in Mesopotamia in 538 B.C. They thought of themselves as Hebrews who had remained in the Land; the returning peoples disparaged them as Gentiles who had been settled by the Assyrian conquerors. The two peoples then waged a *vendetta* against each other which, in that Levantine way, lasted for millennia.

There were a million or so Samaritans in Roman times, but history has been extremely unkind to them, and there are only seven hundred left, clinging to the side of Mount Gezirim, and incidentally offer the Passover sacrifice at night once a year.

## Jacob's Well

goes down 135 feet through solid rock. The water is still good; a Greek Church stands over the site, dedicated to St Photina, as the Greeks call the Samaritan woman. and as recently as 1979 a Jewish mob martyred the Archimandrite who cared for the site – for the friendly tradition of Christ and Photina has not lasted. Friendliness is always a rare commodity in the Holy Land. Sad. Bring back the British Mandate.

If you are interested, have a look at:

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jacob%27s\\_Well](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jacob%27s_Well) and at

<http://maps.google.com/maps?ll=32.211944,35.277778&spn=0.1,0.1&t=h&q=32.211944,35.277778>

[http://orthodoxwiki.org/Philoumenos\\_\(Hasapis\)\\_of\\_Jacob%27s\\_Well](http://orthodoxwiki.org/Philoumenos_(Hasapis)_of_Jacob%27s_Well)

<http://www.haaretz.com/news/ancient-samaritan-sect-marks-passover-sacrifice-near-nablus-1.219497>

and especially this charming site,

<http://www.bibleplaces.com/samaritanpassover.htm>

## *A long look from dark eyes,*

*a riddling sentence to be woven and woven on the church's looms:* James Joyce, *Ulysses*, chapter i. From quite early on in Christian history, Christ is portrayed as an almost owl-faced young Man, with enormous, dark, intense eyes. It will be remembered that a glance across a courtyard lit only by a brazier was enough to unnerve St Peter. I took this photograph a few days ago in the Euphrasian Basilica at Parenzo in Istria.

