



Conversations at the margin

Study three



Pierre Mignard I, *Christ and the Woman of Samaria*, 1681



Have you ever experienced a time when you felt on the outside of something - a group, a community, a situation - and someone made you feel seen or welcomed?

What difference did it make?

Jesus and the Samaritan Woman

(Read John 4:1–26)

Listening to what people are saying can sometimes be crucial. Rumours abound that Jesus might be leading a messianic movement, and to avoid a direct clash with the authorities he takes a diversion in his journeying through Samaria, an area where very few Jews would normally travel.

We have a hot midday sun, a weary traveller, and an unexpected conversation at a well. It was an unusual time for a woman to come to a village well for water, and this might suggest an urgent need, or that this woman was an outsider within her local community (the jury is out on this point).

Every social convention should have kept Jesus and this woman apart - gender, religion, and possibly reputation. Yet Jesus begins not with a sermon but with a request; 'Will you give me a drink?' In asking, he offers dignity. The conversation deepens, revealing her story, her longing, and her thirst for truth.

This encounter is one of unveiling - of who she is and who Jesus is. The 'living water' offered isn't an abstract idea but the very life of God breaking into her situation and spiritual yearning.



Why do you think Jesus begins by asking her for something rather than offering something?

What does 'living water' mean to you in your own faith journey?

How does this story speak into experiences of exclusion or misunderstanding today?

Zacchaeus the Tax Collector

(Read Luke 19:1–10)

The tax system, under which Zacchaeus' income came by extorting more money from people than he had contracted to pay the Roman government, evidently worked well for him, as he had a prime location in which to operate. No one in Jericho liked him, because as a chief tax collector, he was despised. And yet, Zacchaeus' desire to see Jesus was surpassed by the knowledge that Jesus was happy to see him, even inviting himself to dinner and an overnight stay!

The crowd don't understand what they have just seen, but in the willingness of Zacchaeus to welcome Jesus into his home and conversations around the table, a transformation takes place.

Restoring stolen funds 'four times the amount' was far more than the Old Testament specified for restitution (Lev 5:16). Encountering Jesus turns his priorities inside out — from greed to generosity, from taking to giving.

Salvation came to Zacchaeus not because he had finally done a good deed, but because he was now a believer and thus a 'spiritual descendant of Abraham'.



What surprises you most about Jesus' interaction with Zacchaeus?

Can you understand the response of the crowd, and how typical would that be today?

Where might we need to let grace reach beyond our own social or moral boundaries?

'Lent is a time of going very deeply into ourselves... What is it that stands between us and God? Between us and our brothers and sisters? Between us and life, the life of the Spirit? Whatever it is, let us relentlessly tear it out, without a moment's hesitation.'

(Catherine Doherty)

'Lent is a time of grace, a time for conversion, a time to come home to God.'

(Saint Maximilian Kolbe)

The Canaanite Woman

(Read Matthew 15:21–28)

The popularity of Jesus had increased greatly, along with increased scrutiny and opposition from Pharisees and teachers of the law, so Jesus takes a break from the crowds and heads for Tyre and Sidon.

Matthew is writing to a mainly Jewish audience, who would be very interested to read of Jesus doing miracles in a Gentile, or pagan, territory.

This encounter is quite startling. A desperate mother begs for her daughter's healing, and Jesus at first seems to ignore her cries. When he does respond his words sound harsh,

even exclusive; 'It is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to the dogs.' Yet, as the conversation continues, it is her persistence, and the wisdom and faith in her response that Jesus acknowledges with such love and grace, and the woman's daughter is healed.

Here, in their conversation, Jesus draws out her courage and faith, revealing God's mercy is not constrained by cultural or religious barriers. This outsider reminds us that sometimes faith is found in unexpected places.



What do you make of Jesus' initial silence and harsh words in this story?

What does this woman's persistence teach us about faith and prayer?

How does this story expand our understanding of who belongs in God's kingdom?

Summing up

At a well, in a tree, and on the roadside, Jesus meets those the world overlooks. His conversations break down barriers of class, gender, race, and reputation. In each, we glimpse a God who notices, listens, and restores. Lent invites us to follow that same pattern - to look beyond our comfort zones, to listen without judgement, and to discover Christ already at work on the margins.

Think about later

This week, notice someone who often gets overlooked - at work, in your neighbourhood, in your church.

Take a moment to offer a word, a smile, or an act of kindness that says: You are seen. You matter.

A closing prayer

Lord Jesus,
you crossed every boundary to reach us with your love.
Give us eyes to see those who feel unseen,
hearts open to offer welcome,
and courage to share the grace we have received.
Amen.

