

Conflict And Connection

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[0 : 0 0] I'd like us to turn for a few minutes back to the passage that Douglas read for us in John chapter 4.

In our morning services at the moment we're working our way through John's Gospel and last week, this week and next week we're looking at this fascinating incident when Jesus met a woman at a well.

The title of our sermon today is Conflict and Connection. And I've chosen these words partly because they reflect why we're here on Remembrance Sunday.

We're here because of conflict. We remember those from our community who were lost in the great wars of the last century. We remember those who have served, suffered and some who've died in conflict since.

And we also remember people who throughout the world are waking up today and finding themselves in the midst of conflict. We're also here because of connection.

[1 : 0 5] A connection with the past, the peace and the security and liberty that we now enjoy is because of what people were willing to sacrifice back then.

A connection with people who were lost, grandparents, great grandparents, great uncles, aunts, cousins, neighbors, friends. And our connection with one another.

We unite as a community as we come together on Remembrance Sunday. So conflict and connection are massive issues that shape what we do today.

They shape our world, our history, our community. And what I want us to see today as we look at this passage is to discover that these two things are very closely connected.

And that's what I hope we're going to see. And to help us do that, we're going to look at the passage that we read because we find both of these things in John chapter 4.

[2 : 0 0] And so we can read again the verse on the screen. The woman said to Jesus, I know that Messiah is coming who is called Christ. Messiah was the Savior promised in the Old Testament, the one that all the Jews were waiting for.

I know that Messiah is coming. He was called Christ. And He comes, He will tell us all things. Jesus said to her, I who speak to you am He.

So first of all, thinking in terms of conflict, as we come together today, we're so conscious that we live in a world that's full of conflict. And that can range from siblings falling out all the way through to nations being at war with each other.

And whatever the situation, it's a horrible thing to experience. And yet it's everywhere. Families, school, work, communities, politics, football, church, conflict has been a constant source of pain and sorrow in our lives.

And that's nothing new. It's long been a feature of human experience. This passage takes us back 2000 years. And we find exactly the same thing. In particular, the conflict that's mentioned in this passage is the animosity between the Jews and the Samaritans.

- [3 : 27] This animosity between the Jews and the Samaritans is part of the reason why this conversation that Jesus has with this woman at the well, although it looks quite innocent, you can imagine Jesus and the woman meeting at the bridge down there having a chat.
- It seems innocent, it's actually hugely controversial because they're on either side of a very firm and hostile divide. There were various aspects to this Jewish-Samaritan conflict.
- There was racial elements to it. So the Jews and the Samaritans had a common ancestry. Jacob is mentioned in this passage and he was an ancestor for both of them.
- But in the generation since, a distinction emerged between these two groups that became more and more pronounced and it ended up with the two viewing each other with hostility based on the people group that they were born into.
- There were also political elements. During the 300 years or so before the rise, the real rise to dominance of the Roman Empire, the land of the Jews and the Samaritans had been dominated by the Greeks.
- [4 : 32] In that period, which from a biblical point of view is the bit that comes between the Old and New Testament, the Jews had rebelled against the Greeks and they'd been partially successful and for a spell they were able to regain some of their own independence.
- The Samaritans though had been much more open to relations with the Greeks. So politically, the Jews were pretty anti-Greek Samaritans, not so much. And so that's another reason to dislike each other.
- So there's racial issues, political ones, there were also religious ones. As the passage reveals, they also fell out over their religion.
- So they both worship the same God, but they argued about where that worship should be focused. The Jews said that the focus should be in Jerusalem.
- The Samaritans said the focus should be in a place, a mountain called Gerizim, Mount Gerizim, which was quite close to this well where Jesus and the woman met. So there was racial discrimination.
- [5 : 32] We don't like them because they're not one of us. Political tension, they didn't fight my cause, so therefore they're my enemies. And religious arguments. We might agree on big things, but details we disagree on and so we hate each other.
- And there were times when this conflict became violent. Now, I don't need to tell you that this kind of thing has been repeated a million times since.
- And for all of us today, we are so aware that even though in our society conflicts rarely reach the level of violence, although it can happen, even if it doesn't, conflicts are hugely damaging.
- They wreck our families. They can lead to long standing divisions in our communities. They can make work a nightmare this week.
- They can make the school playground one of the scariest places that you can be. Conflicts are hugely damaging in society. And we have to acknowledge that they've also been hugely damaging in churches.
- [6 : 51] Today is one of my favorite days of the year. And the reason it's one of my favorite days of the year is because the churches in Carla we are together.
- It's so, so good that on Remembrance Sunday, we come together. Whether it's in here or next door, as we will be next year, that does not matter one bit.
- It's just so, so brilliant for us to be together as one church family in one service together. It's one of my favorite days of the year.
- But I'm nervous saying this because I'm probably going to offend most people in here when I do say this. Today is an absolutely brilliant day.

Every other Sunday is a disgrace. It's a disgrace that there's two separate churches in Carla.

[7 : 55] And we're so used to it. We forget that it really is wrong. We worship exactly the same God.

We believe in exactly the same Bible. And we want to proclaim and share exactly the same message about the amazing salvation that Jesus offers.

But just like the Samaritans and the Jews, we've got our patch, they've got theirs, different locations. And I'm holding up my hands today and saying that's wrong.

And I think we all have to do that. It's not right. And I know that that's probably offensive to people and I've probably horrified some people by saying that, but it's true.

And I hate offending people, but I don't mind offending people when I offend them with the truth. And I pray for the day that the thing that really horrifies us is the fact that we're not together.

[9 : 04] And if you don't come to church regularly, if you're not normally part of going to church in Carlyway, and if you think that it's ridiculous that there's two churches in Carlyway, then you're absolutely right.

You're absolutely right. And maybe you're asking yourself, why are there two churches in Carlyway? Well, let me tell you. In the 1860s, discussions began about an ecclesiastical union between the Free Church of Scotland and the United Presbyterian Church, which itself had been formed through a union between the United Secession Church and the Relief Church in 1847.

It was then installed, however, because of arguments about religious establishments, the Free Church holding to the establishment principle, the United Presbyterian Church advocated voluntarism.

That led to the formation of two main groups within the Free Church, the Unionists, who favoured union, the constitutionalists, who did not because of the incompatibility of voluntarism, and the Westminster Confession of Faith, which is the subordinate standard of the Free Church, and which holds to the establishment principle, despite the fact that the Free Church was functionally voluntary after the disruption of 1843.

To break the deadlock, declaratory acts were passed in 1879 by the United Presbyterian Church and in 1892 by the Free Church of Scotland. Those acts loosened confessional subscription in each ecclesiastical body that paved the way for union in 1900.

[10 : 23] However, when the union took place, some Free Church congregations did not join, so some communities like Carlyway ended up with a Free Church and a United Free Church, the latter of which united with the Church of Scotland in 1929.

All of that's fascinating, and the issues I described there are actually very, very important, but I'm pretty certain that the majority of you are sitting here thinking, I don't have a clue what you're talking about.

The reason I say that is because when conflict happens, whether it's in churches or communities or families or even nations, so often the conflict continues and we don't even know why.

I long and pray for the day when we're all together, and I don't care which building we're in, and I don't care what we're called, and I don't even mind if you have a much better minister than me, but I pray for the day that we're together.

More widely, whenever conflict arises, there's two key things that we need to think about. One is that when you see conflict and when conflict becomes a reality, somebody has to pay the price.

[11 : 53] That's unavoidable, conflict always carries a cost, and often it's the people who didn't cause the conflict who have to pay the price, they're the ones who suffer as a result.

That's so true on Remembrance Sunday. Other people gave their lives, and in doing so, they paid the price for a conflict that they did not cause. When conflict arises, somebody has got to pay the price.

That's one thing that's true in every type of conflict. The second thing, and this is the one we're going to unpack a wee bit more, is that the violence that you eventually see in war and that costs so many lives, that violence is never the starting point for conflict.

Violence is the fruit of a whole pile of other stuff that's come before it, and all of it can be traced back to one thing. It can be traced back to the way people think.

That's what it comes back to. Whether it's racial, political, religious conflicts, or a combination of them all, the way people think is always the starting point for the conflicts that we see arise in the world around us.

[13 : 19] What do we do? How do we respond to that? What do we do in the face of conflict? If it's true that conflict arises from the way we think, that means that addressing conflict means addressing the way that we think.

That's so crucial because this is something that is so easy to get wrong. It's something that I think has easily got wrong in our own culture today. We live in a time in history where great steps have been taken to reduce conflict.

Today there's a respect for human rights and dignity that's probably the best it's ever been. That's a wonderful thing. It's something that we absolutely rejoice in.

Today, I'd like to suggest, and this is what I want you to think about a wee bit, I'd like to suggest that the reduction in conflict that we maybe see, particularly in some western settings, hasn't come because we've changed our thinking.

It's come because we've stopped thinking. What we need to think about is the fact that that will work for a while, but only for a while.

[14 : 30] We can say, let's just get on with each other. Let's just respect what everybody else thinks. Let's let everybody do what they think is right. Let's everybody just be true to what they think is best.

That can offer a solution. That kind of like let's just effectively pretend that we all agree. It works for a while, but it never lasts.

It's impossible to sustain because different people have different convictions, different presences, different expectations, and before long saying that everything is fine, that we can accept everything, is going to lead to the situation where people have deep-seated opinions that are incompatible with one another and that can't live with one another.

The result of that is that more conflict then arises. You can see that in the world around you. A great place to see just now is if you look at politics in the US, it's become so polarized and the nation has become so divided.

Even though in the last 20 years, there's been much more tolerance, much more acceptance, much more liberty, much more liberalism as a society as a whole, yet it's just made things more and more polarized.

[15 : 53] I think that's helping us to see that the answer is not to just like think, let's not think about these things. The answer is the opposite. We need to really think about things.

I want you all to do some thinking. To do that, to help you with that, I'm going to ask you some questions and I'm just going to pop them on the screen and I just want you to think them through.

Is there such a thing as truth? And just in your mind, you can answer yes or no. Number two, is there such a thing as right and wrong?

Again, just yes or no in your own mind. Number three, when conflict arises, is it true that some people might be more right and others more wrong?

Again, just think that through. And number four, if people are sometimes right, sometimes wrong, or maybe a mixture of both, are there ultimate answers?

[17 : 08] So in other words, if we're looking for, in many ways, the end of question four takes you back to question one. Sometimes people can be right, sometimes wrong. I'm a mixture of right and wrong, sometimes I'm right, sometimes I'm wrong.

But is there an ultimate right and wrong? Is there ultimate truth? Are there ultimate answers? If your answer to question four is yes, then that raises question five.

If there are ultimate answers, who's got them? That's one of the most important questions we can ever think about.

And our claim, and the claim of our brother and sister next door in the Church of Scotland, our claim as a church family, is that the only person who has those ultimate answers is Jesus Christ.

But to see that, we need to think about the second key word in our title, the word connection. In verse 20 of the passage that we read, the woman asks Jesus about one of the big sources of tension in the conflict between the Jews and Samaritans, the location where God should be worshipped.

[18 : 24] Is it Jerusalem? Is it Mount Geresim? And Jesus answers the question by saying, well, actually you're both right and you're both wrong, and he also shows the woman that he's the one who's got ultimate answers.

His response is recorded in verses 21 to 24. Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father. You worship what you do not know, we worship what we know for salvation is from the Jews.

But the hour is coming and it's now here when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and in truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him. God is spirit, those who worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth.

These words are very fascinating because Jesus responds that at one level they're both right, they both worship God. You can see that emphasis here.

At the same time, they're both wrong because they're saying, you know, he's saying actually it's neither going to be on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. But although they're both wrong, the Jews are a little bit more right than the Samaritans are and he highlights the fact that salvation is from the Jews, they worship what they know.

[19 : 35] And so we've got what we describe in our questions is reflected in this passage. There is right, there is wrong, partly right, both right, both wrong, one more right, one more wrong.

But actually, all those details aren't what matters. The key thing is the question of ultimate answers. And that's what Jesus speaks about in verses 23 and 24.

He makes a fascinating statement and in this statement he's giving us ultimate answers. Now you might be looking at those words thinking, what do you mean Thomas? How are these, how is this slightly cryptic phrase going to give us ultimate answers?

Well, let's have a wee look together and see what Jesus says. He says, first thing I want to focus on two things. He says, God is spirit. Now what does that mean?

Well, it tells us three key things. It tells us one, that God is not a physical object. So not a statue, not a pole, not confined to a temple in Jerusalem or Mount Gerizim or whatever else it may be.

[20 : 40] Not a physical object like that. Tells us that God is personal. So he's not an inanimate object. He is self-conscious, he's self-aware, he's relational, he's not this kind of just force that's out there.

He's personal. So God's not physical object, he's personal and thirdly it tells us that ultimate reality is spiritual, not physical.

And that's the thing I want you to think about from that statement, God is spirit. Ultimate reality is spiritual, not physical. So we can observe a lot of stuff around us that's physical, but our claim is that that's not all that's there.

There's reality beyond that. And the ultimate absolute of that spiritual reality is God. He's distinct from the physical creation.

Physical creation is part of a bigger spiritual reality. The ultimate absolute of that reality is God. Now you might be sitting here thinking, I don't believe all that.

[21 : 40] I don't believe in non-physical reality. Well, actually you do. And I can prove that you do because of why we're here today.

We're here for remembrance Sunday and we are doing something that is much more than physical. And we've proved that in a few minutes when we go outside to lay the wreaths because we'll go out there, we'll have the laying of the wreaths at the memorial and as we do that, what is the most important thing that we're doing there?

Is it the beautiful wreaths that will get laid? Is it the stonework of the war memorial which looks fantastic? Is it the writing, the paint?

Is it any of that stuff? No. The most important thing is the people who died. Are they physically present?

No, of course not. That's the whole point. And what matters is not the physical stonework or the wreath or whatever, what matters is the memories, the loss, the sorrow, the thanksgiving.

[22 : 58] None of that's physical. Does that mean that it's not real?

And so all of this is pointing us to the fact that there's a bigger reality than just the physical world around us. The other key thing that Jesus is telling us is that the way we relate to God is in spirit and in truth.

Now again, what does that mean? Well the word spirit tells you just what we've been saying. We've been pointed beyond the physical reality and this is very important when it comes to worship because it's very easy to come to a service like this physically.

You can come and be physically in this building and physically sitting on the chair and physically, even looking at me and you're not paying attention to anything. And it's a waste of time because you're not really here.

You're just going through the motions and that can happen so easily. Worship is beyond just a physical ritual of coming to a building on a Sunday morning or doing certain actions or whatever, maybe that may be.

[24 : 06] Beyond, it involves what's inside us, who we are, our minds, our hearts. And that's why Jesus adds the word truth.

We've got to come with genuineness, with integrity. It's not just something that we just physically do in terms of going through the motions.

And so the woman here thinks that the key thing is the physical mount and the physical temple, the physical location, the correct outward actions. Jesus is saying that's not what I care about. The key thing is our hearts, our mindset, our non-physical devotion, our relationship with God.

In other words, it's all about our connection to Him. Now all of that might sound a bit abstract. It's actually very real because your whole life this week is going to be shaped by your non-physical connections to things, to your family, to your colleagues, to your friends, to your customers, your hopes, your fears, your anxieties.

All of that is going to shape what you do, what you do physically is shaped by your non-physical connections. You can prove that with football. Your support for a football team is non-physical.

[25 : 27] But if you sit down and watch a football match this weekend, it makes a huge difference whether or not you support the team, the effect that that's going to have on you, even though it's a non-physical thing.

We all have these non-physical connections that everywhere in our lives. So your life, my life, full of non-physical connections to things.

Among those connections that we have, there will be one that means the most to us. And there's a word that the Bible has to describe what that one thing is.

One thing that means the most to us. We'll let the boys and girls come in. We're almost done. The minister's going on a little bit too long, as he often does.

Great. Thank you guys. Good.

[26 : 23] So boys and girls, we're talking about all the things that we have connections to that are important to us. We've got lots of things we're connected to, our friends, our family, all the things that we do, our community.

These connections are all very important that we have. So I'm getting all the grumps to think about the things that they have connections to. It'll shape what you do this week. The football team you support, the best friends that you have, all these things.

And we'll all have a connection that's the most important. We will all have a connection that's the most important. The Bible has a word to describe a relationship to that single primary connection.

And the word appears in every single version of the screen. Can you see it?

Your primary connection is the thing you worship.

[27 : 34] And we have got to make sure that we have that thing right. And the great claim of the gospel is that the only one worthy of that worship, the only one who should have that worship is God.

And you know, if we've got that primary connection wrong, if we worship our nation or our race or our football team or our heritage or whatever.

When we think that those things are threatened, it will make us enter conflict. And our connections and our conflicts will all, all go round and round again and again and again.

And it causes no end of problems. We've got to get that primary connection right. And the only one who should have it is Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

I'm going to say one more thing before we close for the two minute silence. We're thinking about conflict and connection. We said that somebody has to pay the price for conflict.

[28 : 56] And we also said that somebody has to give us better answers. We're thinking about connections. If you think about a conflict, you know, you think about, like, Afghanistan is a good example.

For 20 years, soldiers have gone to Afghanistan and they have paid the price for the conflict there. In all of that time, the Taliban's answers, their thinking hasn't changed.

And so the day that the Western forces pulled out, everything went back to the way they were because their thinking had not changed. We need someone to pay the price. We need better answers.

In the ultimate conflict that humanity faces, the conflict between good and evil, Jesus has come to do both of these things.

He's come to pay the price for our sins by dying on the cross. And he's come to give us better answers. He's building a new humanity grounded on love for God, love for one another.

[30 : 00] The woman knew this. The woman knew that the Messiah was going to have the answers. That's why she said to him, I know that the Messiah is coming. He who is called Christ, when he comes, he'll tell us all things.

In other words, when he comes, he'll give us the answers. Jesus said, I who speak to you, I'm he.

I hope. I hope that we can all recognize that today. Amen. Amen.