

# THE HAND OF HISTORY

# WHO IS MY NEIGHBOUR?

## BIBLE STUDY 2

### Reading: John 4: 5-40

#### COMMENT

In the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10: 29-37), Jesus points to a Samaritan man as our good neighbour. In this story in Saint John's Gospel a Samaritan woman also becomes a role model as the good neighbour.

The Disciples are already doing something unusual: they have gone into the city to buy food. This is no ordinary city, however – this is a Samaritan city, and any food they buy from Samaritans is going to be unclean according to Jewish ritual standards. While the Disciples are in Sychar, Jesus sits down by Jacob's Well, and begins talking with a Samaritan woman who comes to the well for water. Their conversation becomes a model for dialogue for people with different faith backgrounds.

Jesus presents the classical Jewish perception of what Samaritans believe and how they worship. The Samaritans accepted only the first five books of the Bible – the Pentateuch or Torah – as revealed scripture. For their part, Jews of the day pilloried this Samaritan refusal to accept more than the first five books of the Bible by claiming the Samaritans worshipped not the one God revealed in the five books but five gods. Jesus possibly alludes to this – with a sense

of humour – when he says the woman had five husbands.

In other circumstances, a Jewish man would have refused to talk to a Samaritan woman or to accept a drink from her hands. Any self-respecting Samaritan woman would have felt she had been slighted by these comments and walked away immediately. Instead, the two continue in their dialogue: they talk openly and humorously with one another, and listen to one another. Jesus gets to know the woman and she gets to know Jesus. All dialogue involves both speaking and listening – speaking with the expectation that we will be heard, and listening honestly to what the other person is saying rather than listening to what our prejudices tell us they ought to say.



When the Disciples arrive back, they are filled with a number of questions but are so shocked by the dialogue unfolding before

them that they remain silent. Their silence means they cannot enter the dialogue. They are still questioning and unable to articulate their faith, but the woman at least recognises Jesus as a Prophet and rushes back to tell the people about her dialogue with Jesus. No one in the city was brought to Jesus by the disciples, but many Samaritans met with Jesus because of what the woman had to say.

The conversation between Jesus and the Samaritan woman is a model for Interfaith dialogue. If we are going to enter into dialogue with our Muslim neighbours we must first be ready to get to know them, to listen to them, to talk openly and honestly with them about where they come from, what they believe, and to be honest about what we believe.

#### CONTEXT

In dealing with people outside the Christian community we are called to make positive moves to reach out in the name of God and with His love. The love of God is the same and constant for all people and in all situations, but there are also particular considerations in building relationships with people of other faiths.

The former British Council of Churches (now Churches Together in Britain and Ireland)

set out guidelines for interaction between people of different faiths. These are:

- Dialogue begins when people meet each other
- Dialogue depends upon mutual understanding and mutual trust
- Dialogue makes it possible to share in service to the community
- Dialogue becomes the medium of authentic witness

On this basis, reaching out to people of other faiths is about making relationships, that is meeting and building trust, sharing in service and witnessing to the hope we have in Christ.

## How do Muslims view their neighbour?

According to Muslim teaching a Muslim woman, for example, has a special responsibility to reach out to her neighbours.

“The Muslim woman who truly understands the teachings of her religion never thinks that any favour is too small to be worth doing for her neighbour; she does whatever favours she can for her, no matter how insignificant they may appear. She does not let shyness or her desire to show off prevent her from

doing the little that she can afford, or make her withhold it on the basis that that it is not good enough, so that she waits until she is able to offer more. Such an attitude deprives both her and her neighbour of much good, because by waiting for some



hoped-for bounty that may never arrive, she wastes the opportunity to do good. The Prophet (PBUH) drew the attention of women in particular to the importance of even the smallest gifts and favours between neighbours:

*“O Muslim women, do not think that any gift is too insignificant to give to a neighbour, even if it is only a sheep’s foot.”*

A sheep’s foot is a thing of little value, but it is better than nothing, and no woman should feel that any gift is not worth giving to a neighbour.”

## CONVERSATION

**READ** St John 4: 5 - 40

**PRAY**

**WATCH** Watch DVD  
Chapters 2, 10

**TALK**

- Jesus was prepared to engage in conversation with the Samaritan woman, how prepared are you to engage with those from whom we differ? Do we have prejudices that would get in the way?
- In what ways can we begin to have dialogue with our Muslim neighbours?
- What do you think are the common areas of understanding between Christians and Muslims?
- What do you think are the greatest areas for misunderstanding between Christian and Muslims?

## CONTEMPLATION

The Muslim community who have made their home in Ireland need and deserve to be understood on their own terms and to be accepted not as visitors but as neighbours. When they come to dinner, what can we give them to eat and drink? How would we find out?



When Muslim children face discrimination in school or are taunted in the schoolyard because the girls wear the veil or refuse to

go swimming, or the boys are fasting for Ramadan or are known to be circumcised, when they are taunted because of their different names or their skin colour, how do we reach out and offer friendship and support?

What happens when workers in a factory or office want a special room for prayers, or need time off for religious festivals or the pilgrimage to Mecca, the *hajj*? What will happen when their children and our children want to marry?

Living with our Muslim neighbours must mean learning about their beliefs and practices, about similarities and differences. That's how Jesus and the Samaritan woman treated each other: that's how this pack helps us to know our Muslim neighbours.

Following any encounter between Christian and Muslim, when each returns to their own community how will they report on what they have seen and heard? The Samaritan woman gives us an example; will we want to expand the dialogue, invite our friends to join in and to share what we have experienced.



If we can be good neighbours in Ireland, and if we can be good neighbours in Egypt, despite our differences and disagreements, then we can set an example of how Muslims and Christians can be good neighbours anywhere else. We can set an example of good practice for any country, whether Christians are a minority or a majority, whether Muslims are a majority or a minority.