

Skipping on a Zebra – Musings on the woman at the well John 4: 1 - 42

Some weeks ago, I stopped at a zebra crossing when driving to work. I watched a teenage schoolgirl as she skipped across the zebra crossing. When halfway across she seemed to realise she was skipping and that it was far from cool and she stopped and adopted a more teenage like swagger. It was a comical sight. I found the little scene quite moving and I wished she would keep skipping. That awkward teenage transition from childhood to putting on the demeanour of a grown up with all the bodily thrownness that goes with it, seemed to be captured in that brief moment. I wanted her to retain a sense of carefree play in her life, the serious stuff will come soon enough.

For some reason and I'm not entirely clear why, this fond memory emerged for me and in a somewhat persistent way, during our recent lesson regarding the Samaritan woman at the well. I thought it was an unconscious thing for me as there is no obvious connection. However on rereading the text I do think there is a strong element of play in the story and as someone who is on the board of an organisation working with children using play therapy, I should know that play is often not care free but can be a serious business indeed.

Play in the context of the woman at the well means a compelling space where new things can happen, risks can be taken, and new thinking generated. It seems to be one of the longest descriptions of a conversation with Jesus in the New Testament and this alone points to an encounter which is a real engagement. She must have been a remarkable woman as she is far from passive and takes Jesus on. We are inclined to think the flow of influence is one way, but she had a real impact on Jesus and her own community. At the beginning of the story he is travelling through, by the end he is staying, having discovered a new harvest. Two rival traditions meet, and she is certainly not shy of asserting hers. They were alone in this conversation and you wonder if it would have been more difficult had the disciples been there. They were off getting food. Maybe their absence made a degree of risk taking less difficult.

So what makes it a space where play can happen? I think there was a kind of conversation that took place that could have been an argument but wasn't because Jesus made it sufficiently safe for something to happen, albeit not without challenge. He was thirsty and wanted a drink and was asking for her assistance. His own vulnerability was nakedly apparent. There was no artifice about this, it was a real need. As already stated, the absence of the disciples may have made this easier. Thereafter Jesus plays with language and metaphor. Metaphors, similes and images can act as a jolt, challenging routine ways of thinking and in this case provoking curiosity. However, I believe this verbal play was in the service of a far deeper commitment to the authenticity of this relationship as it was unfolding. When she leaves Jesus (leaving her water jar at the same time – so he can have a drink?) She is still not sure, but she is open minded and curious and brave enough to overcome her own shame and engage her people in a conversation about new possibilities. Astonishing!

You can endlessly mine this story, but in times of anxiety where people are moving to fundamentalist certainties over which they will argue or even die, wouldn't it be great if we could speak with each other driven first for a desire for a real encounter driven by love and curiosity rather than to win an argument. May it not also be the case that we have things to learn? You need playful spaces for this. What if the silences in our prayer lives and worship could be understood in these terms? A space and time where things can happen in a relationship with God, who in Jesus was thirsty, interested and himself open to learning – what an amazing image.

If my schoolgirl I described at the beginning, is to flourish in her school days, it will be with a learning that has not forgotten how to play. May learning be for her an exciting exploratory adventure rather

than the monotony of being just taught to the test. When my own daughter used to go to school, I would always leave her with the words – ‘enjoy learning’. It seemed to be the best little gift I could give her to start her day. When she is at home from university, she will now sometimes say it to me as I am leaving for work! How right she is, learning does not stop at school or university. Likewise play should never stop either, whether it be the carefree kind or the kind that allows for serious work to be done. If next time you are crossing a zebra and you fancy skipping, I won’t tell anybody. It will be our secret.

Enjoy learning

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