

The Samaritan woman said to him, 'How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?'

Sometimes our spiritual perceptions can be dampened, skewed, or even extinguished by what is the normal and earthly, the mundane and the humdrum of the everyday.

Here the Samaritan woman refers to Jesus the Saviour of the World, the Messiah as simply any other Jew.

She also refers to herself simply as "a woman" and not only that but a woman of Samaria...the Samaritans were simply miles away from the Christmas list of any self respecting member of the "chosen race".

There is an all too earthly and restricted view of how protocol and the place of the "one" person as opposed to "the other" person is expected to work, and if it doesn't work, traces begin to be kicked over, and at the very least people begin to feel insecure or uncomfortable.

The woman, this Samaritan woman is surprised how this Jewish man treats her. In the following discussion, she was even more surprised and perhaps at herself that she had been able to actually take in that this was the Messiah, Son of God, Saviour of the World.

Preconceptions of others can get in the way of a real and living relationship with them.

I went to see an old lady with communion very month in my first living. She was supposedly quite lame and obviously had come to adopt a particular tack with her parish priest whoever it happened to be.

"Forgive me for not rising" she always said as I went into the living room. How she had opened the front door in order to let me in some time before I arrived I never quite fathomed... and was not able to ask, because immediately after receiving communion, she left me in no doubt that it was time for me to leave!

"Thankyou for coming" she said, "see you next month... and don't forget to slam the door behind you."

In spite of how much the now Canon Precentor's charm was brought to bear, the frustration of that encounter being something less than human and being very unreal never quite got conquered.

I was a function who dispensed the sacraments, and that lady was someone quite regal and definitely not to be trifled with.

Like Jesus and the Samaritan woman, her preconceptions of what might be expected needed to be washed away in the water of new life that Jesus can bring to each in a remarkable way.

If I said that in our relationship with God through prayer we can be tempted to put away reality, go through the motions, even treat God as a function, at least less than personal, I think I would begin to make myself squirm.

But I think we can do it all the time. Even the necessarily strict adherence to well-formed artistic liturgy can take us away from the surprise, the unassumed, the immediate encounter, the personal.