# Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well

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Lent 3A. John 4 5-42

We probably remember two other Samaritans connected with Jesus. There was the Good Samaritan of the parable (Lk 10), the only one of the ten Lepers Jesus healed who came back to thank him (Lk 17) and now there's this woman. All very positive pictures.

Yet Samaritans were outsiders: Jews and Samaritans didn't get on at all. Samaritans were very unorthodox Jews. Their Passover was celebrated on Mt Gerizim near Nablus / Shechem – *not* in Jerusalem. They had a different Bible; only the first five books of the Bible, and even so, their version had about *6,000* differences from the Jewish one. Samaritans were hated outsiders. Yet in the Gospels, these outsiders seem to recognise the truth about Jesus very clearly. So what are the gospel-writers looking to teach us through these portraits? To be tolerant, for sure. But is that all? What's John trying to tell us through *this* story?

Today's Gospel lesson is one that calls up very rich associations. We shouldn't expect anything less of John's Gospel. First, we're told that the encounter happens at Jacob's well in Samaria. Jacob also had something to do with another well. He met his future wife Rachel by a well *in the land of the people of the East* Gen 29. Samaritans are ethnically at least partly from *the East*. Back when Assyria defeated Israel, they forcibly populated it with settlers drawn from cities in an area we now call Iraq. So it's no wonder the indigenous and settler populations had an ancient and deep

hatred for each other. Samaria was effectively foreign soil for Jesus too.

So today's gospel presents us with Jesus, a lone Jewish man in a foreign land meeting a lone foreign woman at a well named for Jacob; the woman will also provide water from the well for this Jewish man to drink. Marriage will again be a major topic of conversation. And seasoned listeners will know that the earlier well in Jacob's story [Gen 29] had a large stone covering its mouth; a stone which had to be rolled away to provide the gathered flock with its life-giving water. John evokes that 'stone rolled away' image deliberately; John always has lots of irons in the fire.

We're told it was about noon. Do you remember last Sunday's encounter between Jesus and his visitor, Nicodemus? It was night time then. Today's story happens in broad daylight. Jesus isn't hiding his meeting with an outsider like Nicodemus did. Such a meeting would have caused great scandal among the Jews. [(Compare Jn 8.48 where they accuse Jesus of being a Samaritan and having a demon)]. It certainly shocked his disciples!

So one focus of this story is Jesus's ministry among people considered to be 'outsiders' – another Samaritan story about tolerance. Jesus crosses borders in this story. He enters Samaria; he initiates a conversation with an unaccompanied Samaritan woman, and finally, he even accepts two days' hospitality from the Samaritan village. None of this was thinkable in decent Jewish society.

Jesus asks this woman for water. In today's Psalm 95, it's God who provides life-giving water. In today's story, this 'heretic' woman gives water to Jesus. Later, she will take the water of life – the good news of Jesus – to her village. By this stage in the gospel, her only equals as witnesses to Jesus are John the Baptist and Mary.

And another extraordinary thing; Jesus and this woman have a

serious theological discussion. She knows her traditions. She's waiting for the coming Messiah. In the synagogues, men and women sat separately. Here at the well, Jesus and this woman sit and speak together about the things of God. These are enormous changes.

And as a theologian, the Samaritan woman is no slouch. She misunderstands Jesus at first. But pretty well everyone in John's gospel looks rather amateurish when they first do theology with Jesus. This woman makes much faster progress than most. She starts from a position of scornful sounding doubt –

12 **Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?"**

Then she progresses to a partial understanding, but still confrontational –

19 **…Sir, I see that you are a prophet.** 20 **Our ancestors worshipped on this mountain, but you [Jews] say … people must worship … in Jerusalem.**

and next she moves on towards the truth –

25 **… I know that Messiah is coming (who is called Christ). When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us.**

Finally, once Jesus has identified himself, she rushes to her city to share the good news.

28 **… the woman left her water jar and went back to the city. She said to the people,** 29 **'Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?'**

The really exciting thing about this story is that the most unexpected person can become the bearer of the greatest news

of all – that the divine gift – living water; eternal life – is something an outsider can bear for the world. Scripture always reminds us that *we're* all foreigners really. And yet Scripture also tells us that we outsiders can be the means by which people can discover what those Samaritans soon proclaimed: [42] ***'we know that this is truly the Saviour of the world.'***

The beginning is breaking down barriers – being open to laying aside our preconceptions and our certainties. As middle-of-the-road Anglicans, those preconceptions and certainties tend to be about our faith being a private matter – something we don't discuss in polite society – and that mission is something that missionaries and missionary agencies do – not little old us. How does that attitude stack up with this story?

At the heart of our Lenten study series this year is the message of every-person mission; everybody joining in with the mission Jesus is doing. That's a mission agency – ABM – telling us that we are more than involved in mission; we are committed to mission. And any one of us might discover our mission.

Let's have a few moments of silence for that to sink in, then I'll lead us in an anonymous prayer.

**Five-finger prayer**

This prayer can be a model for the children's prayers. Have them draw around one hand on a sheet of plain paper.Go over what each finger can represent when they pray:

**thumb** – friends and family

**index finger** – people who help you learn about God and Jesus

**middle finger** – leaders in our community and the world

**ring finger** – people who help persons in need

**little finger** – ourselves

Have the children write these categories on the fingers. If time, pray together using the five-finger prayer.

O Jesus,
Image of the invisible God, Word made flesh, tired stranger, waiting in the noonday lull at Jacob's well.

Are we all the woman with her water-jar, bent on the chore of the moment, angry memories in our bones, our thirst for God hidden in the business of the day?

Do you meet us gently too, hardly recognized, quietly leading our thoughts towards the deeper waters, where our souls find rest?

Probing too, uncovering secrets we would rather forget. "Lord, you have probed me, You know when I sit and when I stand, You know my thoughts from afar."

Is the woman, sure and strong, our reflection: sure but unsure, strong but so weak, seeking but afraid to find our Saviour so close by?  Amen

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