

Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well

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Lent 3A – John 4 5-42

There's a lot going on in this remarkable story! Jesus talked to a strange woman in a foreign place, defying strict cultural rules. A man and woman who aren't married to each other were never to talk unchaperoned. Jesus also ignores another barrier. Jews and Samaritans weren't on speaking terms with each other. Samaritans were hated outsiders. Yet in the gospels, outsiders seem open to recognise the truth about Jesus. This foreign woman is the first person Jesus tells who he really is; the Messiah. And in this remarkable story, she moves from a wary stand-offishness to real openness to who Jesus is. Then she proclaims him to all her fellow villagers.

And John is doing much more with this story, deliberately evoking the Jews' and Samaritans' common ancestry by telling us the encounter happens at Jacob's well. You may remember Jacob's story involved another well. He met his future wife Rachel by a well *in the land of the people of the East* ^{Gen 29} Samaria was effectively foreign soil for Jesus too. So today's gospel presents us with Jesus at a well named for Jacob, another Jewish man who met a cousin at a foreign well. And like Rachel did, this Samaritan woman will also provide water from a well for a Jewish stranger to drink. Marriage will again be a major topic of conversation. And many listeners will know that the earlier well in Jacob's story 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. I'm sure John calls up this 'stone-rolled-away' image deliberately.

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; Nicodemus didn't want to be seen. But Jesus isn't hiding his meeting with an outsider like Nicodemus did. His discussion with this woman would have scandalised his fellow Jews. It certainly shocked his disciples!

So a major focus of this story is Jesus going to people considered to be 'outsiders'. But it's not someone sick or demon-possessed this time. Jesus crosses a border. He enters Samaria, initiates a discussion with an unaccompanied Samaritan woman, and finally, he even accepts an invitation to receive two days' hospitality from the Samaritan villagers. None of this was thinkable in decent Jewish society.

Jesus asks this woman for water. In today's Psalm 95, it was God who provided life-giving water. Today, this strange woman gives water to Jesus. But soon, she will take the water of life to her town – the good news of Jesus. At 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. This is really remarkable!

And as a theologian, the Samaritan woman is no slouch. She misunderstands Jesus at first. But Nicodemus, the religious leader also looked like an amateur doing theology with Jesus. This woman makes much faster progress than him. 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.* Then 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 village to share the good news. *Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?*

The most unexpected person can become the bearer of the greatest gift of all –the divine gift – living water; eternal life; bringing others to meet Jesus. An outsider can witness to the world. We outsiders can help people discover what those Samaritans soon proclaimed: ⁴² *we know that this is truly the Saviour of the world.* Insiders and outsiders? Jesus shows this up to be a complete furphy. John puts the story at Jacob's well. Jacob was the ancestor of both Jews and Samaritans. Owning our commonality with others is essential; particularly at this time of the terrible war raging between the three sibling children of Abraham. How do we do this?

Jesus gave us our model today by walking straight into the point of no conversation and starting to talk. We know there are barriers being raised to prevent dialogue –barriers just as poisonous as those which forbade conversation between men and women, and Jews and Samaritans. But it's only through conversation together about the hopes and dreams we hold in common that we will rediscover our real kinship. Jesus walked straight through the barriers and started the conversation. He showed us that's how you find that your sister or your brother is just that; not your enemy; not a danger, but your brother; your sister.

We start by crashing the barriers. Jesus shows us how to do it. Today, let's pray that we might find the courage and strength to ignore the threats and choose to fight openly for reconciliation; reconciliation between estranged siblings who

are waging a war of unwarranted distrust and hatred that must break their parent's heart. Amen