

The water of Life (John 4.5-42)

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'God, I thank you that I am neither a Gentile, a dog, or a woman.' Apparently, that was a popular prayer at the time of Jesus. And when you think of this kind of sentiment in the background, the conversion we've just heard is striking. Last week, I spoke of Nicodemus as symbolising of an ideal in Judaism. For a start he is a man (remember the prayer!), a Pharisee, a leader. In this story, in contrast, we have an unnamed woman, a foreigner – a Samaritan, with an unstable past and a dubious reputation. Most 'good' Jews did all they could to avoid someone like this. But here, Jesus has the longest recorded conversation he has with anyone in the gospels.

The story of their interaction opens with a passing but significant comment from John. Jesus has left Jerusalem and Judea and is heading back to Galilee (in the north). 'But', the text says, '*he had to go through Samaria*' (4). Now it's true, this was the most direct way back, but at that time observant Jews choose to walk around Samaria in order to avoid contact with its 'despised' inhabitants. When it says, '*he had to go through Samaria*' it's not a detail of direction; it's a comment about conviction. The Greek is strong (*he absolutely had to go through*). It has the same sense as when Jesus said 'I must go to Jerusalem'. We're talking about necessity here – a prompting of the Spirit. In a time when many observant Jews assumed that faithfulness meant avoiding contact with the 'unclean', Jesus is led to do the opposite. There's an important point being made here about what really matters to God.

So off he goes and, as we heard, he came near Sychar where, ‘tired out from his journey’, he paused to rest by Jacob’s well. The disciples head to the village for supplies leaving him to recuperate, and while they’re away a woman arrives to draw water. ‘It was about noon’, John says in another aside that is loaded with meaning. In chapter 3, Nicodemus, the paragon of Jewish virtue, came ‘by night’. This Samaritan woman who ticks none of the boxes arrives in the height of the day. And since in John’s gospel, night and day, darkness and light are significant metaphors this is suggestive. Having said that, coming alone to draw water in the midday heat was not normal practice. In Genesis 24, there’s a note about Rebekah (later to marry Isaac) coming in the evening, ‘*the time when women go out to draw water*’ (11). Interestingly, archaeology has also uncovered water sources nearer the town. Why such an inopportune time and place for this woman? Could it be that she was deliberately avoiding the others, that she was socially isolated in her community? Struggling in the midst of an ordinary, hard, working day may not seem the ideal time for a life-giving encounter, but this is exactly where and when it happens for this woman. A reminder to all of us, that nowhere and no time is God-forsaken, that God can and does surprise.

From the get go, the woman *is* surprised. She amazed to see a man there, in the first instance! And even more so when he (a Jew) asks her for a drink. She queries this and (as with Nicodemus) his response is enigmatic: ‘*If you knew the gift of God and who it is saying, “Give me a drink”, you’d have asked him, and he’d have given you living water.*’ Now, we (the reader) know he’s speaking metaphorically, but she (like Nicodemus) takes it literally. ‘*Sir, you have no bucket and the well is deep, where do you get that living water?*’ Well,

mostly literally, though she does perceive him to be claiming something here. And perhaps suspiciously, or maybe cynically, she rebuffs him: *'Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us this well, and with his sons and flocks drank from it?'* (Who do you think you are??) Undeterred, Jesus continues. *'Everyone who drinks from this water will be thirsty again (even Jacob!) but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give them will become a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.'*

So, here he is talking about 'salvation' again. With Nicodemus he used the image of being 'born from above', here he speaks of drinking 'living water'; in both cases the effect is the same – Life! ... 'eternal life'. And, by now, she's interested, though mostly (it appears) for practical reasons: *'Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water'*. True to form, Jesus continues to draw her to a deeper appreciation. *'Go, call you husband and come back'*, he says. To which she responds (rather awkwardly, I imagine): *Ummm... ahem... 'I have no husband'. 'You are right in saying, "I have no husband"; for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband'*.

Preachers make a lot of this comment, but must we paint this woman's moral life in lurid colours? Could it be that she was as much a victim of careless men's divorces or of tragic men's deaths than of her own misbehaviour? We really don't know. Having said that, Jesus does tap a raw nerve in this woman's life – some pain, her sense of insecurity, and likely also, shame. He does it, I suggest, because it is God's nature and desire to bring us to wholeness, and because that necessarily means attending to that which is unreconciled in our lives. Mostly, we'd prefer to overlook and move on. But that doesn't work. Our

wounds and sins have a habit of disrupting things until they are reconciled. Which is why Jesus raises it here – not to condemn this woman but (as he said in chapter 3) in order that ‘the world might be saved through him’ (3.17). His touching on this matter takes her aback; it *is* hard, but as the rest of the story reveals, it proved to be profoundly liberating. This woman is clearly transformed!

There’s not time to go into every detail. There’s the ensuing discussion about where God is to be worshipped. Again, true to form, Jesus cuts through obsessions about certified places and outward forms to the heart of the matter: True worshippers worship ‘the Father in Spirit and in truth’ – under the inspiration and with the assistance and mediation of the Spirit of God – by the Spirit’s going down deep into human hearts and moving them upward to faith in the living Truth, Jesus, who himself opens the way to his Father. In other words, true worship is the reconciling work of God in our lives.

All of this affects this woman deeply. She realises she’s talking with someone special; could he be, in fact, the promised Messiah? ‘*I am he*’, Jesus says, ‘*the one who is speaking to you*’. It’s a moment of revelation, the climactic pronouncement of the story. At that point, the disciples arrive back from the village. They are surprised to see him talking with her but she’s not there for long. Leaving her jar, she went back to the city. I wonder about this detail of leaving the jar. Was this so that Jesus could finally get a drink?! Or is it John’s way of saying that she has actually discovered a more lasting, living form of water? I’m inclined to think it is, for what happens next is really quite extraordinary. Full of excitement and conviction, she compels everyone she knows to come and see Jesus. If she was shunned, she is shunned no longer.

They listen and go out to see for themselves. And, many 'believed in him'. It's a good news story, a story of barriers crossed and lives restored, a story of reversal. A woman on the outer becomes a key evangelist.

Which brings me back to where I started: *'God, I thank you that I am neither a Gentile, a dog, or a woman.'* Ummmm, about that prayer! Lord, I thank you that we're all in this together, all equally loved and that you go out of your way to draw us all in, even those I'm inclined to dismiss – including, if I'm honest, myself. I thank you that you work from the outside in ... and the inside out. I thank you that far from being distant and over against us, you come close and dwell within, forgiving, refreshing, nourishing – a spring of water gushing up to eternal life. God, thank you ... Amen.