

St Alban's
Church

Anglican Parish
of Eastbourne



Jesus and the Samaritan Woman

3rd Sunday in Lent

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John 4:5-42

This story we've been listening to is remarkable for a number of reasons. The first, you might feel a little ruefully, is its length. Then there is the fact that it is only found in John's gospel. It would have surprised, and possibly offended many over the centuries until recently, that it is about the interaction of Jesus with a woman, not even a Jewish woman but from the derided people of Samaria.

It is a compelling story and has a peculiarly visual quality about it. We can almost see the tilt of her head, her slight turning away to avoid looking at him directly as propriety demanded, the archness in her voice "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink from me, a woman and a Samaritan at that?" I suspect the question is not quite what it sounds on the surface. Here unexpectedly was an interesting stranger and she wasn't going to let him go in a hurry.

It probably helps having been there, seen this small world hidden away, walked down the steps and walked around it, seen the water moving on the surface, flowing gently, a well of water with a history that took it back to the days of the patriarchs, to the days of Jacob, grandson of Abraham.

"Our father Jacob gave us the well and drank from it himself" she says, proudly and possessively, little knowing that here was one who on another occasion said "Before Abraham was I am." Despite all her ploys, and she is a clever woman, notice that Jesus doesn't actually fall for any one of them. He doesn't for instance answer her opening, encouraging question. "How is it you are asking for a drink from me?"

His response is: "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is asked you 'Give me a drink' you would have asked him and he would have given you living water." I sometimes wonder if the author of John is aware of the irony he has written into Jesus' response. Jesus has just acknowledged his weariness and his thirst and yet tells the woman he could give her living water, and that the water he would give means that she would never thirst again but become a fountain of water springing up into everlasting life.

Jesus has a more important point to make, "How is it you, a Jew, ask for a drink from me, Samaritan woman that I am?" she asks. If it were me I would probably reply – Well, I've come a long way, I'm hot and tired, I could do with a cup of water. Does it matter I'm a Jew? Or some such matter-of-fact, or dismissive, or irritable response. But no. As keen as she was to enter into conversation with him, he was no less keen to enter into a conversation with her, and it didn't matter a tinker's farthing to him that it was a woman he was talking to, let alone someone from a group of people whom the Jews disdained and looked down upon, and avoided as far as possible.

We see this remarkable quality of intent in the action of Jesus, his intent to help this talkative, eager woman, with a history overladen with husbands, to begin to find the new way of looking at her life, of finding that living water for herself. Somehow he discerned a deep inner need, and effortlessly bypassed all the typical conversational gambits and the rules which govern our interactions. Instead he met her spirit to spirit and she quickly responded. And took immediate action.

The woman left her water pot there on the parapet of the well and hurried off to the township nearby, an eager evangelist. "Look all of you" she calls out to every one "I've just come from Jacob's well. You won't believe what happened there, I've just met a real prophet of the Jews, talked with him. Come and see for yourselves. He knew all about me, told me all the things I ever did. Could it be, perhaps it's the Christ himself? Do come."

John's gospel is highly meditative, a gem of contemplative writing, and it has become loved and revered for that reason. But, you may be wondering, what's all this about the woman's five husbands, and the additional comment by Jesus that "The man you are living with now is not your husband." What is its relevance here, why is there such a big change of direction in the dialogue between them. Jesus had said to her "Go call your husband and come here". The woman answered him "I have no husband."

Do you know, sometimes reading the Bible is like reading the Dominion Post. These past troubled and turbulent years in the Middle East, with the fighting in Syria and Iraq, the rise of Isis and the huge upheaval going on there is just how it must have been time and again over the past 3000 years. Here's a newspaper cutting. It comes from the 2nd book of Kings. *Then the king of Assyria brought people from Babylon, Cutha, Ava, Hamath, and from Sepharvaim, and placed them in the cities of Samaria instead of the children of Israel, and they took possession of Samaria and dwelt in its cities.* So the Samaritans were in effect wedded to 5 different ethnic groups over the course of centuries, and none of them was her true husband. Jesus is looking back into the history of the woman's ancestors and trying to explain to her that her people were victims of mass displacements and refugees and tribal movements. And that the spiritual predicament of the Samaritans could only be resolved by a major change of heart.

What had happened was that Jesus, recognising the yearning of this woman, guided her away from her immediate personal history into an understanding of the situation of her people as a whole. She had come to realise that she could no longer continue the conversation at a superficial level of tit for tat prevarication and banter, let alone of human relationship, and marital difficulties and break-ups.

Now she looks directly at him, says frankly, fearlessly "Sir I perceive that you are a prophet." Her response shifts the whole conversation to the level which Jesus is striving to reach with her. And she receives memorable teaching for us all. "You worship what you do not know" he says. "We worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. The hour is coming and now is, when true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; the father seeks such to worship him. God is Spirit and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth."

What is this well that each of us must stand by, listening, waiting. How can we be moved out of our complacency and triviality and self-centredness. How do we get beyond the mundane concerns of our daily lives? How are our eyes opened and our hearing alerted to the presence of God who is within every one of us, and part of all the routines and concerns and preoccupations of our daily lives. You see, it is not that we should stop worrying about what we should eat and what we should wear and where we should live and what job of work we should do, and who are our friends. It is all of this. And more. There is always something more that we need to stop and consider as our lives unfold for us each day.

This is the peculiar focus of these 40 days from Ash Wednesday to Easter Day. This is why we need special times during the year when we can come into a closer awareness that we are not merely human animals but spiritual animals. And we do this in contemplative prayer. Lent is a time when we may quieten and even deny the clamour of our habitual behaviours and customs and appetites. Lent is a time when we need to feed our spirits, become more reflective, become more open to the needs of this person, my spouse, my children, my mother, my sister and my brother, my friends and mates and colleagues at work. It can be a time when we begin to realise there are angels around us, and that Jesus himself is present within the person I am talking to in this moment.

Even as Jesus recognised the misconceptions, the concerns and worries, the sense of pain and separation, the yearning and the intelligence and love of the woman standing before him, she offered him a dripping cup of water to drink from the well.

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Let's close with a prayer - *Christ be in me, Christ within me*. This is known as St Patrick's prayer and St Patrick of Ireland, who died in March 461, was commemorated on Friday.

Stay with these few words for a moment while we share a brief introduction to contemplative prayer. When you have them comfortably in your head ... '*Christ be with me, Christ within me*' stop repeating them. Let them go, let them pass from your head to your heart. You're not going to think about them, what they mean, what's the theology here - or such questions as 'How can Christ be with me?' And so on and on ...

Instead be silent, empty of thoughts or ideas, empty of words. The very idea of not having any verbal thought going on inside one's head can be extremely threatening for some very normal thoughtful, caring people. And if this occurs in a church or some other religious context, I have heard people say only this past week that they become so scared, they cannot bear any mention of God or Jesus, can't tolerate any silence in which this might happen. This fear is threatening, and real for them.

An adequate period of meditation is usually considered to be about twenty minutes. We're not going there. Such rules are not helpful. Today, now, we are simply going to find out how long we can keep our monkey minds quiet and

free from words or questions or anxieties, or planning what to have for lunch or what to do with the children this afternoon ...

Christ be with me, Christ within me. Stop. Now for one of the simplest mental activities we know. Start counting to yourself 1.. 2 .. 3... and go on until some thought enters your head, as it will. Go back to counting 1.. 2.. 3.. and see if you can manage to be silent, free of all thoughts and ideas and plans a little longer.

May I suggest you try this daily, especially during this second half of Lent. And if the experience appeals to you, try it perhaps twice a day, morning and evening, and let it become a routine. People differ enormously in their acceptance of an exercise like this. For some it will become a valued spiritual discipline for the rest of their lives, for others it is meaningless.

What is the value of this silence, this absence of thoughts, this momentary freedom from the words that are always ready to fill our minds? We must finish here, but let me just say this. Contemplation, or contemplative prayer, is the foundation, the basic reality of our spiritual life. It is how we enter into life with Christ, how we enable Christ to live and grow within us, to be with us. It is the time when we stop thinking about him and are given the grace sometimes to experience Jesus directly in our daily lives.

Christ be with me, Christ within me

Christ behind me, Christ before me

Christ beside me, Christ to win me

Christ to comfort and restore me

Christ beneath me, Christ above me

Christ in quiet, Christ in danger

Christ in hearts of all that love me

Christ in mouth of friend and stranger