

**Lord, let my words be your words,
Inspired by your spirit, and contain your truth,
That they may glorify your kingdom here in this community.
Amen**

Today's gospel story is very well known one.

After a heavy theological encounter with Nicodemus and an unusual wedding in Cana we find Jesus tired after the walk from Judea. He is sitting at a well waiting for the disciples to return from a shopping trip.

He must have been very tired not to be able to accompany the disciples. But that shouldn't surprise us Jesus was a man like us, and like us susceptible to fatigue.

As he sits a woman comes to the well to draw water. Its an echo of other stories of wells and women:

- Rebecca met a servant searching for a wife for his master Isaac (Gen. 24).
- Jacob (the son of Isaac & Rebecca) met his future wife Rachel by a well (Gen. 29:1-20), and
- Moses met Jethro's daughters at a well (Exod. 2:15-21).

It's hot and Jesus is tired, what could be more natural than to ask for a drink to quench the thirst. Perhaps we could imagine that this woman coming to a well is also some sort of bride. Perhaps... except that

- We are in Samaria, and
- Jesus is a Jew, while she was a Samaritan...

For a well brought up Jewish boy (pun intended) Samaria was the wrong place, a place you are not supposed to visit!

The bitterness between the Jews and Samaritans extended back some 700 years to a time when the Assyrians destroyed the Kingdom of Israel, displaced its inhabitants, and then imported communities from five different regions to its new acquisition.

The Assyrian immigrants settled in what was Israel and intermarried with the few Israelites who remained. As a result the worship practices were diluted and compromised.

When the exiles returned to rebuild the temple in 520BC (Ezra 4: 1-3) they rejected the help of those who had remained in Samaria and trouble began. Around 400BC the Samaritans built their own temple on Mt Gerizim.

This Samaritan temple was later destroyed by Jewish extremists and the rest of their relationship is as we say "history".

The barriers of race and creed in Jesus' day were further complicated by gender divisions.

Many rabbis taught that a man should not talk to a woman in the street. Some even refused to acknowledge their wives in public, while certain Pharisees sported bruises from bumping into things when their eyes were shut to avoid looking at a woman!

So here at this well we have a real meeting of opposites – of a Jew with a Samaritan, a man with a woman, a rabbi with a sinner, the one ‘from above’ confronting the lowest of the low, bridging not only the gulf between God and the world, but also all the barriers human beings put between themselves.

This woman represents to us all the bitterness of human separation by race, creed, class, sex, profession, status. No wonder her reply betrays her disbelief, she has reason to be wary and probably fearful of this Jew.

By the way have you ever wondered how she knew he was a Jew?

- Did he talk funny?
- Did he dress differently?
- Was it the way he cut his hair or beard?

Whatever it was she knew they were not the same. His kind wasn’t supposed to mix with her kind. Small wonder that her response is full of suspicion and sarcasm.

Maybe she was wondering if he would he would even have noticed her if he were able get his own water?

Jesus is not interested in an argument.

He is interested in her. His appeal to her curiosity with the words cut through, at least in part, the things that should keep them apart...

“if you knew...”

- If you knew who I really was, who it was who sent me...
- If you knew what I had to offer you, what I am going to do for you...
- If you knew what a difference I could make, the new life you could have...

Jesus has a gift from God to share with her...

He offers her something that will meet her spiritual needs... the gift of living water... but she is thinking about her immediate physical needs the daily grind of collecting water.

But how will he accomplish this he doesn’t even have a bucket.

Perhaps this Jew is deluded enough to compare himself with Jacob?

But Jesus persists he is offering to meet her deepest needs. He’s not talking about actual water or about the things that don’t satisfy, things which leave us thirsty as soon as we consume them.

- Dead water can be the same old television show every night.
- Dead water can be the same old argument you get into every day.
- Dead water can be that little habit you persist in nourishing, that habit which is small in itself, but which will kill you one day.
- Dead water is that fight that started so long ago you can’t be sure why anymore.

The woman does moderate her tone, but she still doesn’t get it. She thinks this water will save her work!

But Jesus is never going to settle for mere respect he is always looking for right relationships.

His request to call her husband serves two purposes:

- Firstly it's culturally the correct thing to do. If she has a husband then anything more should involve him, and
- Secondly, through supernatural knowledge, he wants her to confront her real situation.

Jesus then shocks this woman by lifting the curtain on her life. By knowing things he couldn't know in a natural sense she concludes that Jesus is a prophet. Clearly something extraordinary is happening... the dilemma for her now is how does she respond to this unexpected change in the situation?

Well she does what most of us do when things get a bit personal or a touch uncomfortable... we deflect... we change the subject.

The method she adopts is still a favorite today...

- *let's discuss a point of religious contention.*

The particular religious issue she goes to is at the heart of the Samaritan / Jewish divide – the issue of worship. She asks Jesus where the true place of worship is.

The Samaritan woman apparently placed a great faith in the narratives of her tradition. But as Jesus makes it quite clear, she has it all wrong.

The Samaritans did worship the God of Abraham and Moses but they had stayed there stuck in the Torah.

The Jews had benefited from the continuing revelation of God through the prophets, the Judges and the line of the Davidic Kings.

Both the Samaritans and the Jews were so fixed on the externals assuming that if they got these things right (the how, when and where) God would be satisfied.

But... as Jesus was about to tell here even the Jews were in for a shock.

The Jews and the Samaritans were so worried about where to worship God and when God would come they missed the Messiah in their midst.

Worship is still a great preoccupation of the church today, and sadly more often than not a source of division.

- Are hands raised or kept low?
- Do we conform to liturgical formularies or seek spontaneity?
- Then there is the use of drums, piano, projector, children and icons.
- Pick a worship topic and religion can turn it into a battleground.

It is absolutely true that sincere and true worship can be and is offered through all of these alternatives and many more.

It is also true that insincere and unworthy worship can be offered by each of these very same activities.

In truth these battles are more often about personal preferences, cultural comforts and historical hand me downs than anything truly scriptural or worshipful.

Jesus revelation that God is spirit means that:

- God cannot be confined to one place.
- God cannot be represented adequately by any abstract concept.
- God cannot be adequately depicted by any likeness.

However, (and if I am truthful there are times when I am like this too) the woman at the well still resists applying the teaching of this prophet to her life personally. One last time she tries to deflect Jesus.

In spite of everything Jesus has said to her she clings to the hope that the Messiah will come and when does he will explain it all... even to people like her... and the Samaritans.

But Jesus did not come just to leave her with a false hope. His reply to her statement of faith and longing pulls the rug right out from under her.

- "I am he," Jesus said.

- I am THAT Gift

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. (John 3:16)

- "I am THAT living water.

"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. (Matt 11:28)

- I am THAT Spirit.

I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.(John 10:10)

Of all the possible candidates... teachers, leaders, disciples, Jesus chose this lowly woman, this Samaritan woman, this rejected and outcast woman, to first reveal his name and mission. Jesus speaks the first of his "I am" sayings in Johns Gospel to the one who, in the eyes of nearly everyone else appeared the least deserving of all.

What changed the life of this woman is, that although Jesus knows everything about this woman's life, as indeed he does about all of us, there is no mention of sin or sinfulness by Jesus, no word of judgment not even encouragement to change her life.

But to paraphrase a TV celebrity... **She's excited**... so excited, she leaves her water pot behind.

How does that song go... "my first love is a rushing river"...

She is off... there is good news to proclaim... there is hope to share... and she goes straight to the most unlikely people... the very ones who had caused her to walk to the well in the noon day heat day... after day... after day.

Somehow, the townspeople were convinced!

They must have realized that something big had happened.

This excited, bold, new disciple was irresistible.

She presented no theology, she didn't have a physical miracle to parade as evidence, nothing but her testimony about *a man who told me everything I have ever done!* and this question:

He cannot be the Messiah, can he?

Jesus stayed and taught – a sound principle for us to follow with any new Christians.

And while many initially believed because of the woman's testimony they moved on to a deeper faith through their personal encounters with Jesus.

While we may begin by encountering Jesus in scripture, or through the witness of a personal testimony, or by the careful observation of another's life, we all must encounter Jesus Christ in "spirit and truth" for our selves.

The spirit of a live relationship and the truth of honest self reflection before God that enables us to find the courage to stop going back to the dead water, and change the course of our lives.

Living water is not a tame or stagnant thing that simply ushers in a new "saved chapter" into our lives.

No matter whether you are Jew or Samaritan, Gentile, or Greek, Indigenous or immigrant, man or a woman, child like or more mature, God wants us to worship him in spirit and truth, with the Living Water which sustains an ongoing personal relationship with Jesus.

Not the historical Jesus...Not a future yet to appear Messiah, but...the present, risen and living Christ Jesus... who we worship as we really are, with our hopes, our dreams, our failures, our whole lives... every day.

Jesus is the true wellspring of life

"everyone who drinks of this water will never be thirsty again" (John 4:13)