

Jesus and the Woman of Samaria. John 4:4-42

Straight talking in a crooked conversation

March 2023

John 4:4-42

4 But he had to go through Samaria 5 So he came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. 6 Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon.

7 A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink." 8 (His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.) 9 The Samaritan woman said to him, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.) 10 Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water." 11 The woman said to him, "Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water?" 12 Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?" 13 Jesus said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, 14 but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life." 15 The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water."

16 Jesus said to her, "Go, call your husband, and come back." 17 The woman answered him, "I have no husband." Jesus said to her, "You are right in saying, 'I have no husband'; 18 for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!" 19 The woman said to him, "Sir, I see that you are a prophet. 20 Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem." 21 Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. 22 You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. 23 But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. 24 God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth." 25 The woman said to him, "I know that Messiah is coming" (who is called Christ). "When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us." 26 Jesus said to her, "I am he, the one who is speaking to you."

27 Just then his disciples came. They were astonished that he was speaking with a woman, but no one said, "What do you want?" or, "Why are you speaking with her?" 28 Then 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?" 30 They left the city and were on their way to him.

31 Meanwhile the disciples were urging him, "Rabbi, eat something." 32 But he said to them, "I have food to eat that you do not know about." 33 So the disciples said to one another, "Surely no one has brought him something to eat?" 34 Jesus said to them, "My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work. 35 Do you not say, 'Four months more, then comes the harvest'? But I tell you, look around you, and see how the fields are ripe for harvesting. 36 The reaper is already receiving wages and is gathering fruit for eternal life, so that sower and reaper may rejoice together. 37 For here the saying holds true, 'One sows and another reaps.' 38 I sent you to reap that for which you did not labor. Others have labored, and you have entered into their labor."

39 Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman's testimony, "He told me everything I have ever done." 40 So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them; and he stayed there two days. 41 And many more believed because of his word. 42 They said to the woman, "It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Savior of the world."

Introduction:

People meeting Jesus
in John's Gospel

John 4:4-42

Today is the third Sunday in Lent as we move to the cross and resurrection at Easter. In this season the lectionary continues to take us through Gospel passages that focus us on Jesus and press the key question: Who is he? Who is this man who is about to hang on a cross for the sake of the world?

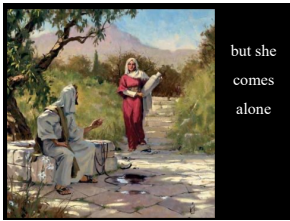
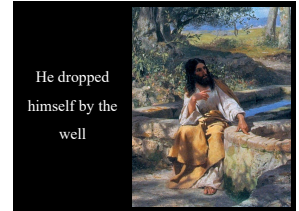
This year in particular we are walking through passages in John's Gospel that involve people meeting Jesus and coming to an appreciation of who he is. The way John relates his accounts of these stories typically involves confusion. Key words are used with double meanings that are meant one way but understood another.

- Last week it was a prominent Jewish leader named Nicodemus.
- This week it is an unnamed Samaritan woman.
- Last week someone came by night as if by private appointment today to learn more.
- Today a woman meets Jesus without introduction in the course of her daily work.

In this rich story about a conversation I am going to focus on the three questions she asks Jesus and what Jesus says to her about himself.

Getting into the story...

Beneath the midday sun a very tired and thirsty Jesus sends off his disciples to buy food while he rests beside a well. The Greek text suggests that Jesus had simply dropped himself beside the well. He was exhausted and needed rest. He is alone until the woman comes along.



For a woman meeting a strange man in an isolated place there may be some tension. Is this man safe? Will I be despised or treated badly? From what we learn later in the account, this woman knows a bit about men. She has had many opportunities to learn how men tick and will be reading the signs.

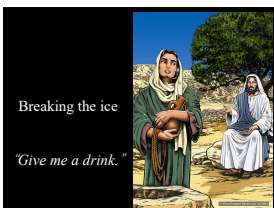
Further still for any encounter between a Jew and a Samaritan in these times there was the possibility of tension perhaps akin to the way Serbs and Croats or Israelis and Palestinians might meet today. Then there was also the potential for tension between a man of God and a woman who had various unresolved issues. This was a situation where the lines of division could have kept them apart.

In the face of this, Jesus sets about to open up conversation with the sort of Samaritan woman who he meets here.

When we want water we turn on the tap and there it flows, living, flowing water, clean to drink. In many parts of the world water is collected, by women at the start of the day when it cooler. While in an village in PNG we had our water brought to us each morning like this.



The water collected in the morning will last through the heat of the day. Women typically do this together. One reason might be because it is generally safer for them. Collecting firewood and water mean being isolated outside the village which can be dangerous so they work together for security. Yet here is a woman coming alone in the middle of the day. This is unusual and would have raised curiosity. Maybe the other women do not want her to go to the well with them? Why would that be? We will hear clues later.



Jesus does not ignore her as many men would – especially religious men! Instead he builds conversation by acting and speaking in a way that makes the woman curious.

He begins by sharing a need and asking her for some water albeit in a way that sounds impolite to us:

“Give me a drink.”

This is a world where un-holiness or defilement was considered contagious so Jews felt polluted by Samaritans to the point where they don't share food, drink, plates or cups. This woman living between Galilee and Jerusalem would expect a Jewish pilgrim traveling through her homeland on his way to Jerusalem to keep his distance. From general experience she could have expected him to be somewhat chauvinist towards her. However, Jesus does the totally unexpected in asking her for a drink which instead makes her curious.

“Hmmm, what have we got here?”

So she asks her **first question**.

“How is it that you a Jew ask me a woman of Samaria for a drink?”

It could be amplified as: ‘What sort of a Jewish man are you that you are not disgusted with me and my cup?’

Her first question:

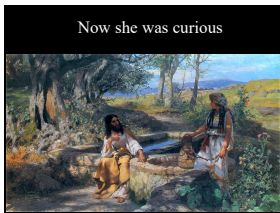
“How is it that you a Jew
ask me a woman of Samaria
for a drink?”

In one stroke Jesus has dismantled the barriers of prejudice. She had not met a Jewish man who would speak with her let alone share a cup of water poured by her before.

If we want to reach people for Jesus we need to learn this trick well because so long as we can be kept in a box

of stereotypes and caricatures nothing we say will be heard. Do something unexpected and people may think again. Do something really prophetic and the world will listen.

An experience which illustrated this to me was my first adult baptism service I took in the Netherlands where they were used to Catholics and -let's say Presbyterians. Many people had been invited including friends and family of those being baptized. At the end of it a small succession of mainly elderly Dutch people came and spoke with me. In each case it soon became clear that they were trying to work out into which of their existing church boxes I belonged in. They had seen things which they had never seen together in the same box. It looked a bit evangelical with guitars and big smiles but then at the same time there was liturgy and the sacraments were taken seriously so that all looked a bit Roman Catholic. To cope with what they saw they actually needed a new box altogether called 'Anglican' or 'International Christianity'. My point is that because we did something unexpected outside their existing frames of reference they had to reassess that led to questions and useful conversations.



Back to the woman at the well, she is now all ears wanting to know why a Jewish pilgrim would share a cup, or even a bucket, with her? With her undivided attention Jesus begins to speak about what he wants to speak about; the living and life-giving water of God - water that he would give her if she asked.

He uses a device he uses elsewhere in using language with a double meaning. In effect Jesus is generating more questions by saying he can offer living water. 'Living water' could simply mean flowing water as found in rivers or springs as opposed to the still water pulled up from the well. The difference is quality and quantity. That is not actually Jesus' intended meaning but that is what the woman understood.¹

This conversation is progressing to a place where there might be a true revelation of identity. Each interchange enables a bridge or relational link to be built to the point where the conversation can progress to a higher level.

So still thinking in concrete terms -just as Nicodemus did last week about being born again- she considers Jesus' claim to be able to provide flowing water. She asks her second question.

"Where do you get that living water?"

You do not have any equipment so are you for real or not? How do you operate?

Her second question:

"Where do you get that living water?"

Her third question:

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

Before Jesus can address this question she delivers question number three.

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

Her second and third questions burst through and come down to this.

"Who are you really?"

In asking this she establishes her identity as a descendent of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob just as much as Jesus is by asking whether Jesus will better the provision of their last common ancestor, Jacob.

'You people may think you are different but I know our ancestry we both carry the blood of Jacob in our veins but who are you really?'

In the ancient world no one would claim to be a better person than their ancestor let alone a common ancestor. So to put it sharply,

"Hey! Mr. curious, big talking, Jewish man- what do you say to all that? We are family and you can't possibly claim to do something better than our great ancestor Jacob who dug this well can you?"

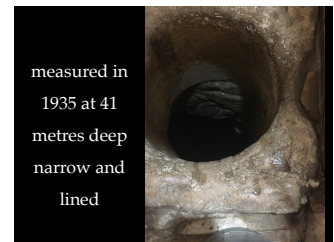
¹ Qn. Why did he not make himself better understood? Ans: He had not been taught communication theory! Hallelujah!!

In 2019 I got to visit this well in the crypt under a Greek Orthodox church building.



It is deep narrow and lined.

The water tasted good.



Back to the promise of living water. Jesus was not talking about literal flowing water as cascading H₂O as she had concretely understood it. He was not promising her plumbing with a tap! So to move on he focuses her on the metaphorical water of life that continually satisfies every person's life into eternity. He tells her about water for the soul -to nourish our essential self. This resolves the confusion and the woman now hears the offer more in the way Jesus meant it. Jesus has avoided the distractions, challenges and teasing she has raised and gently persisted to the point where she understands that he is offering her something very good.

- She wants this living water of life.
- She wants the spring of life to flow in her even though she may not be totally sure what it is.
- She trusts Jesus has her good at heart.

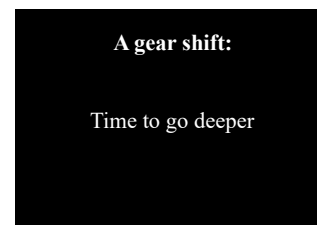
“Sir give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water”

“Whoever you are, and whatever it is you are talking about, give it to me!”

The preliminary conversation is now over. Jesus has the woman's undivided attention and her trust. She trusts him and wants what he is offering.

She wants to know who he is but her vantage of anonymity is about to crumble as the conversation gets very personal.

Jesus now touches a very sensitive part of her life: men and marriage.



Friends, most of the time with most people we live behind a shield. We keep our pain and our shame buried. The less people who really know the better. Despite our careful silence occasionally someone with eyes of love, wisdom and insight might see and recognize what we keep carefully covered. If they point to or name what they see we are stripped and laid bare. It can be very uncomfortable.

In beginning the next level of conversation Jesus lays bare the theme of her life and the pain that has coloured it.

“Go, call your husband, and come back.”

“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. What you have said is true!”

This is dramatic: The sad history that she has been married formally and informally many times is out.

What do you do when exposed like this? The options I have seen operate are:

- Denial
- Fight - eg. counter accusation, physical attack etc. “But you...” or, “You can talk!...”
- Flight - get away and never come back.
- Distraction - change the subject quickly, sow confusion, muddy the waters redirect attention.

The woman chooses the distraction option to turn the conversation by refocusing it back on Jesus and matters of religion. She declares the obvious that Jesus is a prophet, someone who sees what only God could have revealed. Then moving along, she asks a live question about worship. There is nothing like a bit of abstract theology to relieve personal pressure! She asks a question that Jews and Samaritans have disagreed on and at times fought over for the preceding 400 years. Where does the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of Moses require people to worship him?

One moment we are talking about her life with men and the next moment we are comparing interpretations of the Torah between Jews and Samaritans! This is not uncommon but Jesus is not going to be distracted. This conversation is about bringing life to a dry and thirsty woman and not resolving religious issues.

Jesus does prophesy to the woman saying that the day is coming and is already present when true worshippers will worship the Father in Spirit and Truth. In fact, the first rays of light of that day were already breaking in from over the horizon.

The conversation arrives:

"I know that Messiah is coming. When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us."

"I am he, the one who is speaking to you."

This talk of future hope makes the woman think of the Samaritan's expectation for the Messiah who will make all God's purposes plain to them.

So she says;

"I know that Messiah is coming. When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us."

Now we come to something amazing. Jesus closes this conversation by saying something to this nameless discouraged Samaritan woman with a life time of marriage problems that he says to no one else in all the Gospel records. Without ambiguity, he declares himself to her, and her alone, as the awaited Messiah.

"I am he, the one who is speaking to you."

The disciples then reappear on the scene and the woman rushes off back to the village gathering her neighbours to meet Jesus as the man who had read her life's book.

Application and Conclusion:

There are two lessons I want to draw from my reading of this conversation.

1. Right at the end Jesus unambiguously declared that He was the Messiah. Being sure about Jesus as *the* Saviour of the world and God's *only* provision for the *whole* world is not popular today, certainly not outside the church. Political correctness prefers to make him one among many and blend in with the crowd of religious greats. Doubt is more fashionable and Post-Modernism does not allow for too much certainty in matters of faith. Christians are therefore often described as arrogant when they declare Jesus as both God's Universal Saviour and God's Judge for all humanity in all ages.

If these were claims about Jesus were about what we Christians made up for ourselves then that would indeed be arrogant. If Jesus were presented as who I claim him to be then it would be arrogant because I have no right to claim a better grasp of truth than anyone else about someone who lived so long ago. But that is not the way it is meant to be. As people of faith we believe in Jesus because of his word and not because we make Jesus to be who he is.

In this passage we have a record of Jesus speaking for himself about himself in clear unambiguous terms that no one can confuse. We can hear his claim to be the Messiah and that leaves us with the simple choice. Do we believe him or not? In other words we are following him and responding to him as he presents himself in the Scriptures. Are we believing because of his word or because of our assessment of him?

To believe what Jesus says about himself is not arrogant. It is not that Christians are right and everyone else is wrong, it is simply that we believe and trust what Jesus said about himself.

Conclusions:

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"I am he, the one who is speaking to you."

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"I know that Messiah is coming. When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us."

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1. We believe and follow Jesus.
2. Imitate the Woman in asking Jesus questions.

2. That leads me to the second lesson from the woman at the well: When we have questions take them direct to Jesus. I have found this very fruitful in my own life. The Samaritan woman asked three big questions that kept the conversation flowing and built the relationship. I encourage you to do the same. Then and now, Jesus responds to those who earnestly seek him and ask questions. You may not always get the answer in a format you seek but you will grow in relationship that will answer the question in another way. Then, beyond this Jesus may surprise you as well.