

## **SERMON: 15 March 2020 – Rev Alistair Cowper**

**" Come fill me with living water "**

**(John 4:5-42)**

I want to read the first few verses of John 4 in order to put the story of Jesus encounter with the woman at the well in context.

Now Jesus learned that the Pharisees had heard that he was gaining and baptising more disciples than John – 2 although in fact it was not Jesus who baptised, but his disciples. 3 So he left Judea and went back once more to Galilee.

4 Now he had to go through Samaria. 5 So he came to a town in Samaria called Sychar, near the plot of ground Jacob had given to his son Joseph.

There are two things in this that tell us something about Jesus.

Firstly, the text tells us that Jesus left Judea when his reputation among the Pharisees was growing. A rabbi with a growing reputation would normally hang around and watch it grow.

Not Jesus it seems.

Jesus didn't care for his reputation. He wasn't here to be popular. He was here to do the will of the God who sent him.

Secondly, John says that Jesus had to go through Samaria, the name associated with the northern kingdom of the divided Israel.

He had to go through Samaria, says John. No, he didn't.

Jewish rabbis who cared about their reputation would avoid Samaria at all costs. They would go around Samaria not through it. Setting foot in Samaria would defile a pious Jewish rabbi and so they would avoid it by by-passing it.

Not Jesus.

The sense that he had to go through Samaria tells us that Jesus was prepared to go where other rabbis were not. He goes to the foreigner, the unclean, and the enemy. He goes to the lost. He goes to where there are people in need. He doesn't bypass people. He meets with them where they are.

And so he goes to Sychar, otherwise known as Shechem, famous for being the place where Abraham had lived, and where Jacob kept his flocks and

where both Jacob and Joshua are buried.

Jesus knows about Jacob. He knows the history of the times before there was a division between Israel and Samaria. He knows that the whole earth is the Lord's, and everything in it. There are no 'no go areas for Jesus.

HT at Beeslack used that phrase a lot. There will be no no go areas in this school, no places for pupils to hide and carry on.

In Jesus' world view, everywhere belongs to the Lord. The earth is the Lord's and everything in it; the world and all who live in it (Psalm 24).

I don't need to repeat however, that it was unusual for Jesus to be alone in conversation with a woman, especially a Samaritan woman coming to the well at a strange hour of day, when the well was quietest, so that she might avoid other women, who disapproved of her. It's likely this woman had a reputation and people tried to avoid her or make her feel unwelcome.

It's to this outcast that Jesus comes. It's to this socially excluded woman who Jesus asks for help from.

Please give me a drink.

Jesus is not frightened of his reputation nor is he frightened of asking for help; especially if that request engages someone who is currently excluded from the kingdom.

Rather than ignore her, he invites her to serve him, giving her a sense of worth.

Does this put her at ease in order to share more of a conversation?

In wondering who this stranger might be, as he talks about giving her the gift of living water, the woman thinks surely you're not claiming to be greater than our ancestor Jacob, who dug the well?

Jacob had become a bit of an idol in Sychar. Jacob is the ancestor who it appears is being revered if not worshipped.

It's seems its time for people to move on from this and discover the living God for themselves.

If you keep drinking from Jacob's Well you'll become thirsty again and again but whoever drinks the living water Jesus brings will never thirst again.

The woman hears this and wants it. She's attracted to what Jesus is saying.

Jesus tells her to go and get her husband, to which she says, I don't have a husband.

That wasn't exactly the whole truth.

But if you were her would you tell the whole story right away. Jesus knows the truth. He knows she's had five husbands and the man she's with now is not her husband.

Now notice that although Jesus knows the truth, he is not condemning her. He knows the messiness of life. He knows that things don't always go to plan.

But there might also be something else going on below the surface.

In 2 Kings 17:24 - In the eighth century before Christ, the Assyrians eventually conquered the northern kingdom of Samaria after besieging it for 3 years.

The king of Assyria replaced the Israelites with 5 different people groups - from Babylon, Kuthah, Avva, Hamath and Sepharvaim.

Samaria, and the whole northern kingdom of Israel, is likened to a wife who'd had five husbands and the one she was currently living with was not her true husband. Samaria was Israel estranged from her husband, the one true God who was now revealing himself in the person of Christ at the well.

The whole fracture of the kingdom of Israel into two separate kingdoms was a result of Israel's turning away from the Lord.

It was a separation that pained God. It was a separation that Jesus, in having to go through Samaria, was determined to heal.

What does John's Gospel tell us but, that God did not send Jesus to condemn the world but to save the world through him, we might translate that as to heal the world through Jesus (John 3:17).

And he begins with an outcast woman of dubious repute.

And he tells her you don't have to wait any longer for the Messiah. He's here with you right now.

In the midst of her messiness, Christ is there with her. At that well, that meeting place, that ordinary place of conversation, where people came every day to fetch water and to let their animals drink.

Jesus meets people where they are.

Christ comes to people in the midst of their lives as they are. People don't need to wait for some distant event. He is here with us now.

I'm conscious that there is so much more that could be said but let's skip on to the end of the conversation and the woman has realised that Jesus has spoken into her life in such a way that she is profoundly moved.

She leaves her water jar and goes to tell others - the first evangelist in Samaria - Come, see a man who told me everything I've ever done.

"Leaving her water jar ...."

When people encounter Jesus or the Risen Christ, they leave behind the old ways of fetching water; the old ways of living.

They don't need to return to the old ways. The Good News that Jesus brings, tells of a new way to follow and to press on towards.

This story is sometimes coupled with the Exodus story in Exodus 17 where the Israelites are on their way out of slavery in Egypt to the promised land. They complain and grumble along the way because there is no water. And they even blame Moses for bringing them out of Egypt.

A few years ago, I heard Colin Sinclair, the current Moderator, say that "if our default position is to doubt and to express that in grumbling and disunity, it is going to be a long hard road to get to the Promised land".

Thankfully Moses didn't doubt but responded by getting on his knees before the Lord and is told to take his staff, and together with some of the other leaders, walk ahead of the people. As they do, the Lord meets them, Moses strikes the rock and water pours out for the people to drink.

Grumbling and complaining is certainly an example of the old ways that people need to leave behind. But there might be other things that we need to let go of so that we can give ourselves to the new way that Christ points us to.

The woman left behind her old life. She started to talk about how this encounter had changed her life.

And the result?

"Many believed because of her testimony" yet they went on to point out that it wasn't just because of her they believed.

Two things about that to finish.

Firstly, we must let people go away and discover Christ for themselves.

Secondly, testimony is important. We need to be able to say, “this is what God has done for me”.

We might not always say it in words but it’ll be evident in how we live our lives. There will be evidence of having had the encounter with the Living God, in how we go about our daily lives.

And every day, let us know that in Christ we are filled with the living water and may that love flow out from within, until all things are made new.