



Kirknewton and East Calder Parish Church of Scotland

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Sermon: Rev Dr André Groenewald

Reading : John 4:1-15

Background to the reading

In the time of Christ, Western Palestine was divided into three provinces, Judea, Samaria, and Galilee. Samaria occupied the centre of Palestine. Israel fell in 722 **Before Christ** after a long siege by the Assyrian army. Most of the population of Israel were captured and sent into exile. Their descendants came back, settled in Samaria and married into all the Gentile nations.

The Jews considered these Samaritans as “half Jews” who were untrue to God and their traditions.

This animosity continued in Jesus' day. Both groups excluded the other from their respective cultic centres, the Jerusalem temple, and the Samaritan temple on Mt Gerizim. The Samaritans, for example, were forbidden access to the inner courts of the temple in Jerusalem, and any offering they might give was considered as if it were from a Gentile. It appears Samaritans were in practice treated as Gentiles. All marriage between the groups was therefore forbidden, and social relations were greatly restricted. With such proscribed separation, it is not surprising that any interaction between the two groups was strained.

The mere term Samaritan was one of contempt on the lips of Jews, and among some scribes it possibly would not even be uttered. Although there is less evidence of similar attitudes from the Samaritan side, we can assume they existed. Jesus' attitude toward the Samaritans differed radically from that of his Jewish contemporaries, which is very clear in our reading.

The Samaritans and the Jews had significant differences on religious issues. The Jews accepted the law, the scriptures and the prophets as their bible while the Samaritans only considered the first 5 books of Moses as their Bible. While the Jews worshipped God in Zion in Jerusalem, the Samaritans worshipped God in their own temple on Mt Gerizim.

In our reading all the above mentioned differences and hostilities occur. Jesus travelled through Samaria to Galilee and he came in a town called Sychar near the plot of land which Jacob gave to his son Joseph. Jesus came to the well of Jacob. Jacob's well was within view of Mount Gerizim, which was holy to the Samaritans. It was the sixth hour. The "sixth hour" normally means noon; thus Jesus and the disciples had been journeying for perhaps six hours.

Then there came a single Samaritan woman to the well. The local women would not come to draw water in the midday heat. Usually the well was outside the gate of the town and served as a meeting place, especially for the women, who had the daily task of drawing water for the household. The fact that this Samaritan woman was alone, said it all. She had a reputation. But Jesus did not care. He asked her for some water. Although Jewish teachers warned against talking much with women in general, they would have especially avoided Samaritan women, who, they declared, were unclean from birth. Everything of the Samaritans, their food, their land, their water was considered as unclean. Under Jewish law, even her water vessel was considered unclean for Jewish drinking.

Then Jesus tells her that He can give her the "living water". "Living water" simply meant "fresh" or "flowing" as opposed to stagnant or well water. Jesus is speaking figuratively here while the woman takes his words literally. She says: But how can you give me "living water" – you do not have anything to draw water with? She could not understand how this stranger could provide any water without a bucket and rope, let alone bubbling spring water. She then reacts by making the point clear that although the Jews consider themselves as *the* children of Jacob, they the Samaritans are his children too. And how would it be possible for Jesus to be greater than Jacob?

Jesus continues his argument by saying that the water He is talking about is different from the water she knows. He is talking of the water of God who never ever runs dry. The water He is talking of is the Living Water that comes from God. Although the woman may have been thinking about well water, Jesus was interested in internal or spiritual water. Such water would become in *a* person not stale cistern water but a free-flowing fountain or spring of water leaping or bubbling into eternal life. Isaiah had promised Israel that the thirsty and hungry could have water and bread that would not cost them money, and outsiders would be brought into the fold. Here, however, not merely the faithful of Israel but also the rejected and thirsty half-breeds of Jewish society were being drawn into the fold of Jesus.

Jesus broke down the barriers and offered this lady an opportunity to be part of the new relationship between God and his people through Jesus Christ. I can just imagine her confusion: why is this man talking to me and what *is* He saying?

It is at the end of this chapter that we see that she realized that Jesus could be the Messiah. The Samaritans expected the Messiah as someone who would be the *Tahab*, or restorer, a prophet like Moses. Jesus' whole appearance and conduct

might have changed her to doubt the general Samaritans' belief of the Messiah. This general everyday type of conversation could have changed her life for the better forever!

Sermon

Text: ¹³ *Jesus answered, "Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, ¹⁴ but whoever drinks the water I give him will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life."* ¹⁵ *The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water so that I won't get thirsty and have to keep coming here to draw water."*

I am sure all of you have experienced an unexpected conversation or situation that changed your perspective or even your life.

I remember one such event. When we were still new in this country and struggling to find our feet our "new car" that we bought for £550 started to make funny noises and I suspected it would break down any minute. Since I am not gifted to do anything with my hands, we were really in a pickle. I did not know anyone to help me and to be honest I did not have a lot of cash to spend. So one day I just passed this garage and decided to pop in. To my astonishment I could not make out one word the man was saying and his facial expression made my stomach turn. And then as I was trying to explain to him what I wanted, he just nodded his head, grabbed my keys and climbed into my car. I thought to myself "this is the rudest man I have ever met". He climbed out again and said something about phoning me and my details. I wrote them down and his gesture suggested that I must go now. So off I went. I dreaded the thought of going back to fetch my car. But I had no other option. After a week he phoned me and I could make out that the car was finished. I paid for the repairs with having no clue to what I was paying for! But then after a month the noises returned in the car. I had to go back to that rude mechanic. I remembered how I was dreading it. But to my astonishment, I could understand him better and this time he did listen to me. He said I must wait and after an hour, after checking the engine and doing some repair work, he came over and said that the car was fixed. He handed me the keys and said that if I have any more problems I must just bring it back. And then when I took my wallet out – he off course not knowing that I had only a few pounds left – said that there was no charge! I thanked him and drove away. On my way home I realised that in that one day I had learned a very important lesson, namely not to judge other people just because you do not understand them! The mechanic did not only fix my car but also taught me to "listen" better in future before I judge!

The same was true for the Samaritan woman. An ordinary conversation at the well changed her perspective not only of the Jews but also of the Messiah. She learned to drink from a well that will never ever run dry!

On our daily journeys we do come across people that we have learned not to like because of their family history, racial or class prejudice and previous incidents. Sometimes we haven't even spoken to them before. As Christians we ought to be open to be surprised to God's intervention.

We ought to be surprised by discovering the real people who are often covered by prejudice and gossip. We ought to listen not only to what people are saying to us but also what they are *not* saying to us!

We need to share our faith with the world. The world is so thirsty for justice, peace, happiness and love that can only come from God. We must bring people to the well of God in order for them to experience how it feels to have peace, love and acceptance.

But if we block the well of God by our prejudices and hypocrisy the world will not be able to see it. If we judge and act by excluding people – we are then not acting the way Jesus showed us.

As we journey towards Easter we need to show love and compassion to all people. We need to come to the well of God as often as we can. The well of God can be any place or event where you feel the presence of God. It can be even the conversation with a stranger where God teaches you an important lesson!

May we go out on the streets and find those who are seeking God's living water! And may we never be discouraged to stop asking if someone does not want to drink from this water.

Amen