

## Woman at the Well WSC 7/7/19

Read John 4:1-30 and 39-4.

The last time I preached at the 9 am service, we looked at Nicodemus spending time in the unhurried presence of Jesus for a night, and how his life changed from being an upright Pharisee and giving up all that entailed to be a follower of Jesus. He carried out a sacrificial act of worship in helping Joseph of Arimathea to bury the body of Jesus. We have recently been through the Talking Jesus course in small groups, and the witness of the Woman at the well was mentioned in session 5 by Shevon, the young woman from the London housing estate. I have continued to reflect on the unhurried presence of Jesus and how he was recorded as making time for everyone, especially those who wouldn't have been on the visiting list of a prominent teacher. One of those people was the Samaritan woman at the well, and this narrative has several similarities to that of Nicodemus. But while Nicodemus was searching for answers to his questions, it appears that Jesus was intentional about seeking out the Samaritan woman. At this stage of Jesus' ministry, the Pharisees were string to take an interest in what he was doing, but it wasn't the time for him to challenge them and invite opposition, so Jesus decided that he and his disciples would travel north from Judea back to Galilee. They could have taken a longer route to Galilee by crossing over the River Jordan and going along its eastern side, using the well travelled trade routes, but Jesus decided to take the more direct route through Samaria.

It was the hottest part of the day when they reached Sychar and the disciples went into the town to buy something for lunch, leaving Jesus to rest by the well. John often included natural and everyday insights about Jesus in his gospel - Jesus was continually giving out, so he used up a lot of spiritual and emotional energy. He had probably been up very early to spend time in prayer, so it was natural that he was tired. Perhaps, knowing that he would be talking with the woman, Jesus suggested that the disciples go into town so as not to overwhelm her with the company of several Jewish men. Normally, women and girls would collect water in the cooler parts of the day, morning and/or evening, but she came, at mid-day and alone, probably to avoid the normal insulting chatter while waiting in the queue to draw water. Interestingly, John didn't even record her name, so we'll have to keep referring to her as 'the woman'.

It was Jesus who started the conversation by asking the woman for some water. This was a surprise for her - as we read in v9, Jews didn't associate with Samaritans **and** she was female. The Samaritan nation at the time of Jesus was made up of the descendants of former Jews and Assyrians following their conquest of the northern kingdom of Israel in 722 BC. The resulting culture was a mixture of worshipping the God of Israel and idols. They used only the five books of Moses as their Scriptures (Genesis to Deuteronomy), and had set up their own temple on Mount Gerizim where they worshipped, although that temple had been destroyed by the Jews around 110 BC. The Jews hated Samaritans because they felt their worship of the Lord wasn't pure. Samaritans were judged as being unclean - a Jew's cup or bowl used or touched by a Samaritan would be destroyed, well, I suppose it saved on the

washing-up. Samaritans held a grudge because of the Jews' self-righteousness and because of the desecration of their place of worship.

The conversation between Jesus and the woman continued with the illustration of the gift of living water. Living water here, I think, is the difference between a running stream and the water of the well which was fed by underground pools. But the woman thought in physical terms rather than in the spiritual way that Jesus meant. She was concerned that he couldn't give her water because he didn't have a bucket, that he was inferior to Jacob who had dug the well centuries previously and she thought that if she had living water, her physical need for water would be taken away. Jesus had started the conversation by asking **her** for a gift of water from the well, but he was willing and able to give her a greater gift - the water from Jacob's well would only satisfy physical thirst for a while, but Jesus' gift of living water flows through a person's spirit and completely satisfies their spiritual thirst. From her viewpoint, she didn't understand that Jesus meant the gift of eternal, joyful, abundant life as one of his followers.

But Jesus wasn't going to let her misunderstanding prevent her from hearing more, so he challenged her to go and bring her husband to meet with him. She gave an evasive, but honest answer, that she was currently without a husband. But with the prompting of the Holy Spirit, Jesus revealed that he knew about her private life. She had a string of five broken marriages and was currently living with a partner - she would have been considered an immoral woman in her culture, but I wonder how much she had been used and abused, her self-esteem must have been at rock bottom. She was searching for meaningful and fulfilling love, but she didn't recognise her need of salvation. The woman was taken aback that Jesus knew her history and said that she thought he was a prophet. He was going up the scale of her estimation. Then she threw in a statement about the right place to worship, possibly to deflect him from challenging her about her sin. But Jesus considered her question and gave her this lovely teaching about worship. Worship can be enjoyed as part of a congregation and we are blessed by those who can lead us into worship together, but it is also an offering of individual devotion to the Father, genuine and heartfelt, from our spirits in tune with the Holy Spirit. Through Jesus, the **place** of worship wasn't going to matter but it would be the attitude of the worshipper which was to be important. In Spirit and truth - this is inclusive - all believers would be welcome to worship God the Father, irrespective of background, gender or race, with the help of the Holy Spirit through the work of Jesus, the Truth and the Way to the Father.

Then the woman then made another deflecting comment - that the Messiah was going to come and teach them all about spiritual truth. Then she was completely shocked when Jesus told her openly that he was the Messiah. Wow! One commentary I read said that this was the only occasion before his trial that Jesus openly declared himself as the Messiah, and to a sinful Gentile woman! But she didn't have the hang-ups that anyone in Judea would have had. **She** wasn't going to accuse him of blasphemy, or denounce him to the Jewish leaders, she simply accepted what he said by faith! Jesus had travelled through that 'unclean' country to meet with one specific person, and through her to reach her town for the kingdom of God.

At that point, the disciples arrived with lunch and the woman went back into the town, telling everyone what she had learned. Her testimony was: v 29 “Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did. Could this be the Christ/Messiah?” Curious to find out for themselves, the people went to the well to see Jesus. They were spiritually thirsty, we read in v 39 that many of those in the town believed in Jesus because of the woman’s testimony, but many more believed when they heard him teach about his Father. Jesus stayed there with them for two days – that was unhurried presence! Jesus and the disciples must have stayed in guest houses, or with local families, they were all prepared to become unclean for the sake of the souls of the Samaritans. At the end of that time, the Samaritans were able to say with conviction that they believed that Jesus really was to be the Saviour of the world. For the woman, Jesus had gone from being an ordinary man, not as important as Jacob, to a prophet, to the Messiah, to the Saviour of the world, who would give them all eternal and abundant life. Here in John ch 4, we can clearly see the steps of her journey to faith.

That was the result of her spending unhurried time with Jesus. She witnessed to others what she had learned from him. She hurried back home, greeting the people with her exciting news, whereas a few hours before, she had wanted to avoid contact with them. “come and see” .She told her story, in just a few words and invited them to hear Jesus for themselves. Perhaps the villagers noticed the change in her – from being someone who hid in the shadows and trying to avoid everybody, she had become confident enough to look at them directly and invite them to meet Jesus. “Come and see...” I think they were intrigued by her saying that she had found the Messiah. She simply told the story of what she had learned from Jesus, and the change in her confirmed that story. In the Talking Jesus course, we considered how distinctive lifestyles demonstrate our spiritual growth and attract others to question why we’re different. So, what do others see and hear when they meet us and get to know us? Are we demonstrating characteristics of love, kindness, generosity, service, grace, encouragement, and other gifts and fruit of the Spirit?

From the reaction of the Samaritans, we see that faith isn’t generally gained by second-hand experience, although it is part of the journey. Faith is all about encountering Jesus for ourselves, it’s trusting in the one who is the revelation of God the Father, the living truth. The Samaritans described Jesus as the Saviour of the world, not a concept that they would have discovered from their scriptures, but they had no doubt that they needed saving from their sin and realised that only faith in Jesus could fulfil their need.

Jesus was intentional about sharing the good news of his Father’s love with anyone and everyone he met, knowing that all need to have their sin forgiven, find acceptance and a place to belong as one of God’s children. We should do the same – everyone, no matter who they are, need believers to pass on their excitement about what the Holy Spirit has taught them about Jesus, particularly of the abundant and eternal life that he gives to those who put their faith in him.

Time spent in the unhurried presence of Jesus encourages us to tell of what he means to us. The evidence of our distinctive lives will witness to others of our amazing God.

