

Third Sunday in Lent, Year A

Today's Gospel reading this morning begins by telling us that Jesus had to pass through Samaria to get to Galilee. This isn't entirely true, at least not as we read it.

In fact, as Jesus was leaving Jerusalem, there was a well-worn path that all Jews would take that went around Samaria, they'd walk this road so that they wouldn't have to pass through Samaria at all. Such was the animosity between Jews and Samaritans that even being in the same region was taboo.

To put it in perspective, for Jesus' disciples it would have felt like walking through the roughest neighbourhood at night. No one wanted to be there. And yet we begin this story with the statement in verse 3 that Jesus had to pass through Samaria. What drove him there? Was it the people or person he would soon meet?

Jesus takes his disciples into Samaria and sends them to get food while he sits alone at a well on the outskirts of the town.

In the heat of the day a woman comes, on her own, to draw water. The stage is set. It is a curious thing, this woman coming in the middle of the day. It would be normal to draw water first thing, to prepare for the day's work. It would be normal to draw it in the cool morning. Practically speaking it does not make sense to come in the middle of the day. Unless you want to avoid everyone.

This woman comes at a time when she knew she'd run into no one.

Now we need to be careful about jumping to a conclusion why. The story doesn't tell us. What we do know is this woman is ostracised from her community and prefers the discomfort of the middle of the day, over against the discomfort of being around others.

Already you can see a stark contrast in the setup of this story, to the previous one in the gospel of John. In John 3, Nicodemus: a well to do, highly respected Jewish man, a teacher, comes to Jesus wanting to speak with him. In John 4 we have an unknown woman, a Samaritan and cut off from her community, surprised at Jesus speaking to her.

This transition from John 3 to John 4 shows the breadth of the reach of the Gospel. In most respects we have polarities in the two stories. The common factor is that Jesus directs the conversation in both cases to where the person needs to be.

Let's read the story:

A woman from Samaria came to draw water. Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink." Immediately the conventions are broken. She knew she should not talk to Jesus, Jesus knew he had to talk to her. It stuns her, she effectively accuses Jesus of being

inappropriate. She says, “How is it that you, a Jew, ask for a drink from me, a woman of Samaria?”

Jesus invites her to himself. She puts up a wall and he dismantles it. If you knew who I was, you would have pursued me for a drink. You would have asked me, you would let all your fear, shame, discomfort, fall away and you would have done the unthinkable for the sake of the prize that I offer you.

And how does she answer this highly personal invitation and offer? She argues theology. What an amazing response!. You would not expect Jesus, after telling a woman in her position to break every social convention, to be met with a debate on buckets, the well and what the great-great-great-great, very great grandfather did.

What’s she doing?

She’s deflecting. Jesus has offered her an amazing gift, but it opens her up to vulnerability - can she be seen talking to, going to, a Jewish man in the middle of the day? Isn’t it interesting how Nicodemus, in the last chapter, hid behind the comradery of being a teacher and Jesus challenged his theology? In this story the woman at the well wants to hide behind theology and Jesus calls her to an uncomfortable familiarity.

She deflects the conversation but Jesus sees right through her. He is not here for a theological debate, but to invite her to worship in spirit and truth. When she deflects, Jesus brings it back.

You are looking for a drink, whoever drinks of the water I offer will never be thirsty again. All of a sudden he’s not talking about water. He promises eternal life, welling up from the soul. This invitation - a hazy telling of the gospel for sure - cuts through and all of a sudden she is captivated. Is she sick of drawing water, is she sick of working through her own broken world left on the outer, enduring life cut off from community?

Jesus draws the conversation away from physical water to living water of the presence of God.

In Jeremiah 2:13, The Lord himself paints this image for his people:

for my people have committed two evils:

they have forsaken me,

the fountain of living waters,

and hewed out cisterns for themselves,

broken cisterns that can hold no water.

This is why we need to be careful about how we view this woman. She is not unlike us - she is like us in so many ways. We all ‘drink’ of many things that leave us thirsty. Which is as we listen to Jesus and Jeremiah means nothing other than forsaking God

and pursuing other gods. It is when we treat anything as if it has the power meet our deepest needs, that we rob them of the good they can provide and make them something they can never be - the thing that saves us.

Jesus calls himself the living water - the one who can truly quench our parched souls, but we prefer to find the answer ourselves. It is the story of humanity: that we continue to believe that we can earn true satisfaction; that our best efforts can deliver what we know is missing. We may not be able to articulate exactly what that gap is, but certainly we all have said at some point in our lives 'if only...' and you can fill in the rest yourself... And once we have placed that unrealistic expectation on anything in our lives, no matter how good that thing is it will never truly satisfy. The more we want it to live up to our expectations, the greater our failure will seem - it will only leave us thirsty for more.

That's what happens when we live without grace. Jesus stands directly in contrast to that. He has come to this Samaritan woman to divert her attention from meeting her own needs and to draw deeply from him. She can never achieve for herself that which Jesus is offering to her without cost. And whilst it's the kind of thing you can't adequately describe in words, we can see the effect soon enough, by the end of the story in fact. But we're not there yet.

This is what Jesus means when he says that he is living water that will truly satisfy. He will take the place of all these idols and he can meet our deepest need. And that's precisely what he offers the woman.

But just when she begins to get an appetite for this living water it seems like Jesus completely changes the subject:

She says 'give me this water' Jesus says 'go get your husband'.

How on earth do these two things go together? It would seem that Jesus jumps to an illogical request. This discourse has more digressions than the average sermon! Does this living water require a husband? Or has he hit the mark on the very thing that this woman has chosen to try and fill her need?

'Sir I don't have husband.'

'I know' he responds, 'you've had five and the man you're now with isn't.'

And where does she go? Back to theology. "Sir, I perceive that you are a prophet. Our fathers worshipped on this mountain, but you say that in Jerusalem is the place where people ought to worship."

He gets too close again, she pulls back. He knows! She changes the subject to talking about the temples.

Now I don't know about you, but if someone laid out in front of me a personal history like that, my first thought would not be about places of worship. Her secrets have been laid bare, will it hurt, and will it drive him away? Does the truth ever hurt our

chances with God? Does it ever drive him away? Jesus cannot truly satisfy until he can reach to the depths of our human need and prove the power of his love in the places where we doubt anyone ever could see and not reject us.

Instead Jesus offers a new way. “Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father.”

In the gospel of John, ‘The Hour’ is always pointing to the cross. Jesus promises this woman living water, he delivers it to her, and the world, on a day when he thirsts, when his mouth and his heart runs dry. The Samaritan woman, and we along with her, receive a whole new life, with our deepest needs met by God himself because Jesus took on the ultimate thirst of being separated from God.

And this promise hits the mark for this woman. Remember again how the story starts? She comes out on her own, choosing the heat of the day over the discomfort of being around people. How does the story end? Jesus tells her to get her husband, she doesn’t. She gets the whole town! This woman who had had 5 husbands and now living with a man who wasn’t, runs back to the people she wanted to avoid and declares: Come and see this man I met!

You can almost imagine people rolling their eyes, ‘here we go again’. But she is not ashamed, she has a new message: Meet the man who told me everything I ever did. Now let’s pause there for a moment. Is that true? Did Jesus recount her life story? Of course not, but he reached into the most hidden place, the most tender spot, the thing that caused her guilt or shame, the thing that led her to avoid people.

And he met that place of bondage with grace and freedom. By ‘everything I ever did’ she means ‘the things I wish people didn’t know’. But Jesus knew it and loved her. It did not exclude her from the living water.

What does this mean?

It means we need not be afraid of God or being honest before him. The living water fills those dry and barren places in us and brings life in him.

The change she experiences, that Jesus knew the worst in her and still blesses her, transforms how she views herself. If Jesus knows and does not condemn her, than she cannot condemn herself either. If Jesus does not condemn her, but sets her free, then the opinions of others do not matter. By grace now she is not afraid of people, but now cares for them. The same people she avoided because of their opinions of her are the people she first goes to, to announce the messiah!

Jesus came to her and changed her life, he became the one who truly made her whole and quenched her thirst. We receive the same grace from him too.