

Spring of Living Water

(John 4.5-42)

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The Woman at the Well

Jesus is travelling through the foreign region of Samaria,ⁱ when he meets a woman at the well outside the city of Sychar. It's the wrong time of day to draw water and she's alone, separated from the other women – a sign that for some reason she is an outcast in local society. (The story suggest she may have been a prostitute.) When Jesus breaks all conventionⁱⁱ by speaking to her, asking for a drink, a surprising and profound conversation about God starts up.

Banter about why she, a Samaritan, should help *him*, a Jew – (Jews and Samaritans hate each other) – quickly gives way to deeper issues. Sensing deep need, Jesus offers her the gift of *living water*... water that will meet her deepest thirst... water in abundance and never running out. It's a conversation that ultimately leads to faith, commitment and discipleship... not only for the woman, but also for the whole city. That's how the story ends.

But our focus today is on her reply to Jesus' offer,

*"Sir, give me this water,
so that I may never be thirsty (again)..."* (15)

It is a voice of genuine desire. Life as an isolated woman is a struggle for her and she needs... *something different*. She's not afraid to ask... not afraid to open herself to the wild possibility that perhaps this stranger can deliver. That's what desperate people do.

When you hear her voice, does it strike a chord *anywhere* inside you? Is it a voice you recognise?

Struggle

In a previous parish, a young man thanked me for my sermons, especially for sharing stories of personal struggle. *"But,"* he said, *"I know you make them up for our benefit. I know it's not really*

like that for you." I was so gob-smacked it took me a while to reply! No, it *is* like that for me... in fact I only tell you a fraction of it.

I often struggle – lost... thirsty... as though something essential is missing. So when I hear Jesus offering a "*spring of water gushing up to eternal life*", I'm like the woman at the well, I want it! It is why I'm here... why I continue with the contradictory experience of church. I'm drawn by the possibility of a transformed life – of a new spirit surging and bubbling through this ageing body. I am a thirsty man in need of a drink. And I'm not ashamed for you to know it... for it's the truth.

What's it like for you? Does this gospel offer of *living water* interest you?

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What can we say about living water?

Firstly, we need to be clear about what *is* on offer... and what's not. The promise is... *to meet our thirst*. The promise is... *life in abundance* – not a charmed existence... not prosperity, approval, success, health... not even happiness... only *life*.... and lots of it... as a constant enduring experience.

And there's an essential pre-requisite. We need to recognise our thirst. We need to want *something different* badly. It's why the question of whether we associate with the Samaritan woman's voice or not is crucial. If we don't have the desire, if we don't feel an attraction, this gospel isn't going any further for us.

The metaphor that Jesus uses, is a *fountain* or a *spring* of water, gushing up within us, in a never-ending flow of spirit and life. (14b) It speaks of energy, a creative life-force, that bubbles up and spills over from a person, as a natural flow. And in imagining such a person, Jesus is the exemplar. It is *who* Jesus is – it's not a technique or posturing, not something he's learned at a workshop – he can't help himself. It's this freedom, this love and life oozing out of the Christ, which makes him so compelling and attractive.

Living water is a *gift* of God. (10a, 14b)

- You can't *purchase* it. In the story, the disciples are off at the local market, *buying* food, (8) and they miss the opportunity for *real* sustenance.ⁱⁱⁱ Consumerism and its myriad religious off-shoots will finally fail, because it cannot, for all its promises, meet human thirst.
- You can't earn it via *status* and approval – the Samaritan woman is a social outcast.
- Nor does it come by *moral rectitude* – for again, *she* is clothed in the innuendo of immoral living. (16f)^{iv}
- And it doesn't come via correct *belief* – to Jewish eyes, this woman, as a Samaritan, is a heretic. (22)

At first glance, *living water* is a *nice* metaphor... for who doesn't like the sound of soft tinkling water in the background. But a deeper look soon subverts such comfort.

As God's gift, it can never be our possession. It is flowing water^v – that cannot be dammed or hoarded. It is a moving spirit, not a commodity that can be captured and poured into a swimming pool, for us to splash around in at our convenience. This water splashes all over you, drenching you to the core. You can't control this spirit, rather it carries you in its surge. You could drown in its power... In fact that's the point – you don't ever control this water... rather it carries you!

And having a gushing fountain erected within one's person, is not a minor make-over. To begin with, there needs to be space. It can't happen while our life is crowded full of other stuff. It is a transformation that requires the surrender of old strategies, and the embracing of emptiness. And we are talking about major plumbing here. This is not simply changing the colour of the bathroom towels – this is back to the foundations and starting again. We are opening ourselves to be rebuilt by God. (Remember last week's metaphor of being *born again*?)

This is God's offer – a fountain of living water gushing up within us. I hear the invitation, as a man lost in the desert sees palm trees on the horizon. How is it for you?

Nicodemus and the Woman at the Well

We can't leave today's gospel without looking at the comparison that John, the gospel writer, wants us to see... between Nicodemus, (who we met last week), and the Woman at the Well. Nicodemus,

leader and teacher of the Law, *should* be open to the invitation of new life... and yet isn't. While this unnamed woman, an immoral heretic, shouldn't... and yet is!

Nicodemus *probably* wants it... but not *nearly* enough... whereas this well-woman is like a terrier with her teeth in a bone... once locked on, she's not going to let go. She is more honest, more desperate and therefore more open... whereas Nicodemus has too much to lose. He wants to keep his status, have a bet each-way and hang around in the shadows as a *secret* believer. At the end of today's story, this woman rushes back to town shouting to everyone, in broad daylight, that she's met a man who she thinks is the Messiah. (29) It's very simple – she commits and Nicodemus dabbles.

We *are* supposed to notice the contradiction and the comparison. The two stories follow one another.^{vi} And guess who *John* thinks is going to receive God's gift of living water? (It's *not* Nicodemus.)

ⁱ It is the direct route from Jerusalem to Galilee, but many Jews would go around the territory because of their loathing of Samaritans – a long held historical prejudice and rivalry.

ⁱⁱ As a Jewish man of status (a rabbi) he should not be speaking to a) a Samaritan, for they are unclean; b) a strange woman... because she's a non-related woman. He breaks a double convention

ⁱⁱⁱ This point is amplified by the later discussion between Jesus and the returning disciples about food in verses 31f.

^{iv} The business about *many husbands* combined with her status as an outcast, suggests sexual immorality. It may well also carry the double meaning of Samaria's flirtation with foreign masters, currently Rome, instead of staying faithful to the one *marriage* with God.

^v Original readers would have noted that the word used by the woman for 'well' is *phrear* (11), which means a cistern (trapped, still water), whereas the narrator (6) and Jesus (14) use the word *pege* which means fountain.

^{vi} With some teaching in between.