

The woman at the well

This may surprise you to learn, but two thousand years ago, the land of Judea – what we might think of as modern day Israel – was divided religiously. Not by Judaism and Islam – Islam wouldn't be established until around 600 years later – but by Jews and Samaritans.

The thing most people today know about Samaritans is that there was a good one. The story of the Good Samaritan is one of the two best known of Jesus' parables. 'Good Samaritan' is a term that has wide use outside of Christian circles, and often just simply 'Samaritan' means much the same thing.

According to their tradition, the Samaritans are the descendants of the Israelites who remained in the land when most of the Israelites were exiled to Assyria from 732 BC.

The Samaritans held their own Pentateuch as the original Torah ("The Law") – it is much like the Jewish Torah, but they held that the Jewish Torah had been changed. The most notable theological divide between Jewish and Samaritan doctrine concerns the holiest site, which the Jews believed was the Temple Mount in Jerusalem, but the Samaritans held was Mount Gerazim.

The Samaritan faith was like the Jewish faith, but the differences caused great division between them.

Today's bible readings began with Jesus encountering the second most famous Samaritan in the bible – the woman at the well.

Jesus had left Judea and was heading back to Galilee – and he took a shortcut through Samaria, a fairly normal thing to do. We know that that part of the world has always been a mixing pot of people and cultures, and although they have often been in conflict, they've also been engaged in trade, and travel through each other's territories and so on. And culturally they had – and have – a lot of things in common.

Jesus and his disciples came to the Samaritan city of Sychar, and they stopped at Jacob's well – a site significant to Jewish and Samaritan people. The disciples went into the city for food, while Jesus waited at the well. It was the middle of the day and most people wouldn't go to collect water at that time, so it would have been a quiet time for Jesus – away from crowds and his disciples.

And then a woman came to draw water from the well. A Samaritan woman.

She wouldn't have expected anyone to be at the well – but she found a man there – a Jewish man – and he asked her for a drink.

The Samaritan woman said to him, "You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?" and explains, "(For Jews do not associate with Samaritans)." (4:9)

Jesus doesn't address her concern at all, instead, he alludes to who he is: "If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water." (4:10).

It's a strange conversation, isn't it? It reminds me of several conversations in John's gospel where things seem to be being talked about at different levels. You might remember the conversation with two of John's disciples at the beginning of his ministry in chapter 1, and the one with Nicodemus in chapter 3.

Here, by Jacob's well outside Sychar, the Samaritan woman said to Jesus, "you have nothing to draw with and the well is deep. Where can you get this living water?" It's a good question – and she hadn't finished yet.

She asked Jesus if he was greater than Jacob who made the well. And she refers to Jacob as 'our ancestor' because Jacob – who took the name 'Israel' – was ancestor to both the Jews – which included Jesus – and to her people, the Samaritans.

But Jesus didn't answer her question, instead, he told her about the living water that he's offering: "Everyone who drinks this water [the water from the well] will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst." (4:13-14)

And what's more:

"Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life."

This seemed like a good offer to her. If she accepted the water that Jesus offered, she wouldn't have to keep coming back to the well in the middle of the day. At this point, though, she hadn't properly grasped that the 'living water' that Jesus offered would satisfy a different thirst from the one that brought her to the well, day after day.

The strange conversation continued, because then Jesus told the woman to go and get her husband – but it seems that Jesus was wrong. "I have no husband" she said.

Jesus' response gives her an indication of who he is – because it becomes obvious that he knew more about her than she expected: "The fact is, you have had five husbands, and the man you now have is not your husband." (4:17-18)

And that knowledge convinced the woman of Jesus' supernatural power: "I see that you're a prophet"!

We don't know how the woman came to have five husbands. But it seems that she was divorced five times (because she's not referred to as a widow, which would be the other explanation). And for a Samaritan woman to have been divorced five times in that era it is likely that she couldn't bear children - if a woman couldn't have children, a man would have been within his rights to divorce her.

So rather than her being someone who "collected" husbands, it's likely she was getting more and more desperate over time. And her situation would have been more or less known, and generally frowned upon. That explanation is speculation, but it does fit with what we do know, and it explains why the woman would have been going to the well in the middle of the day – because that's when it's quiet, when there'll be no one else there to hassle her.

The woman is very much convinced of Jesus' importance. But still there's this Jewish – Samaritan divide: "Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you Jews claim that the place where we must worship is in Jerusalem" (4:20).

It's either the Mount Gerazim or the Temple Mount in Jerusalem. It's one or the other. A point halfway in between the two wasn't going to work as a compromise.

That division was real between the Jews and the Samaritans, but Jesus explained to her that things were changing; "a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem (4:21). The place of worship will not be important – but the object of worship will. Salvation, Jesus explains, is coming from the Jews – it's coming through the line of the kingdom of Israel – through the Jewish people, but it's not limited to those people.

Jesus concludes by saying "God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in the Spirit and in truth."

Worship, Jesus says, is not about where it takes place – whether in the temple, or a synagogue or on a mountain top – or a church – and it's not about ritual and liturgy and priests and robes, it's about people coming together, to worship in spirit and in truth, to worship God.

It was breaking down the old ideas of worship that had developed in both the Jewish and Samaritan cultures, and also opening them up: not just to Jewish people. Not just to Samaritan people. But to all people. I don't think many of us here identify as having either Jewish or Samaritan backgrounds.

In this conversation, Jesus was telling the Samaritan woman how God's promises to Abraham back in Genesis 12:2-3 are being worked out. "I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you [...]and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed"

In response, the woman said she knew the messiah is coming, and that when he does he will proclaim everything.

Then Jesus confirmed to her who he is: "I, the one speaking to you—I am he." (4:26)

Unfortunately, though, we don't get to read of the Samaritan woman's reaction to Jesus' statement, because "just then" the disciples arrive on the scene. They were surprised that he was speaking with a woman – and a Samaritan woman at that! But no one said, "What do you want?" or, "Why are talking speaking with her?" (4:27)

None of the disciples spoke to her. None of them offered her some of the food they'd brought back from the city.

And the woman left the well, leaving her water jar behind.

She went back to the city, and shared the good news, and invited people to come to Jesus: "Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did. Could this be the Messiah?"

Could he be the messiah? The one that the Samaritans, as well as the Jewish people, had long been waiting for? She asked the question, but the way she asked it, she was pretty certain of the answer.

The Samaritan people seemed open to the idea: We heard in verse 30 that they left came out of the town and made their way toward him.

So, it seems this Samaritan woman was the first woman to follow Jesus as the messiah. And she was the first non-Jew.

And she was the first evangelist too: She came to know Jesus, and she shared that news – that good news – with the people of the town.

Then John's gospel gives us yet another strange conversation – this time when the disciples offered the food they'd brought back from the town – getting food was why they'd gone into the town in the first place.

But he said to them, "I have food to eat that you know nothing about." (4:32)

We can see from where we are today that Jesus wasn't talking about the same sort of food as the disciples were – but the disciples couldn't, and suspected someone else had brought him food.

"My food," said Jesus in verse 34, "is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work." That's what gives him nourishment, and gives him energy to continue his mission

"Don't you have a saying", [he asked] "'It's still four months until harvest'? I tell you, open your eyes and look at the fields! They are ripe for harvest. ³⁶ Even now the one who reaps draws a wage and harvests a crop for eternal life, so that the sower and the reaper may be glad together. ³⁷ Thus the saying 'One sows and another reaps' is true. ³⁸ I sent you to reap what you have not worked for. Others have done the hard work, and you have reaped the benefits of their labour."

This is it. Things are ready. The kingdom of God is at hand. The scriptures were being fulfilled in and through Jesus.

As we were reminded last week in church, long ago, God had promised Abraham, that "all peoples on earth will be blessed through you." (Genesis 12:3b) the good news of Jesus was now reaching the Samaritans – and what's more, they were responding:

Verse 39, tells us "Many of the Samaritans from that town believed in him because of the woman's testimony..."

And when the Samaritans from Sychar came to Jesus (4:40), they urged him to stay with them; and he did stay there – for two days. And Jesus teaching to them caused many more Samaritans to believe.

Of course, the Samaritans didn't know the full story of Jesus – of his death and resurrection, for their sakes and for ours – as we do, and yet, they turned to him in faith. They turned to him as their long-expected messiah, their saviour.

The Samaritan woman came to understand who Jesus was, and she dared to explain it to her own people. She was an evangelist, she was a sharer of good news, just as we are encouraged to be.

But as we do that, we need to remember, it's not about us – it's about Jesus. Who Jesus is. What Jesus has done. It's Jesus who changes lives, not the woman at the well, or the preacher in the pulpit, or person who shares the good news over coffee. It's never our convincing words or eloquent speeches or good actions.

And the Samaritans effectively said that to the woman in the last verse of our reading today “We no longer believe just because of what you said; now we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this man really is the Saviour of the world.” (4:42)

We can be witnesses to Jesus. We can speak eloquently and act bravely, and do all sorts of good things in the name of Jesus.

But in the end, it's not our actions that change peoples' lives, it is Jesus.

And I think that's heartening: It is great to be part of sharing the good news of Jesus, but in the end, the sharing of the good news is not dependent on me. Or on any of us. We might fail – but the good news goes on.

We might share the living water with those that are thirsty, but we need to remember that we are not the source of that living water.

Echoing this exchange with the Samaritan woman, in Chapter 7 of John's gospel, Jesus says, “Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink. As the scripture has said, ‘Out of the believer's heart shall flow rivers of living water.’”

Are you thirsty? Because if you are, know that the living water is there for you.

And if you know anyone else who's thirsty, why not offer them the living water that Jesus offers?

Amen.