

## Sermon – Are you greater than our father Jacob? 30/4/23 (SB)

### John 4: 1-26

If you're going on a long journey, it's a good idea to take a drink with you. In fact, it's essential, especially in an area where water is scarce. Dehydration is a killer.

I wonder what people did in the days of Jesus? They didn't have plastic bottles, but they may have taken a bottle made of animal skin which could be filled up at a well. Maybe the disciples had such a bottle which they took with them when they went off to buy lunch, leaving Jesus with nothing.

If you were travelling through Samaria today, those with a smart phone would ask Google, "Find nearest well" and that little red pin would come zooming down and plop onto the map at a place called Sychar. In those days, no doubt wells would have been key points on footpaths; for local people, for travellers and for shepherds coming there to give their animals a drink. Archaeologists find it difficult to find traces of people who lived in tents, because they leave virtually nothing behind, but where they have dug a well, that may be the only thing that's left, and continues to be used for generations, for hundreds, even thousands of years. And so, to this day, there is a well in Nablus in the West Bank, in the valley below Mount Gerizim, near to Shechem where Jacob bought a plot of land, which lays claim to being Jacob's well.

It was here that Jesus sat down and rested when a Samaritan woman arrives to collect water. We don't know her name, but for John, when he wrote down the story, what defined her was that she was a Samaritan – to his readers, that said it all. The Samaritans were looked down on by the Jews for historical reasons. They were of mixed race and regarded as heretics in matters of religion.

It's the 6<sup>th</sup> hour, that is, 12 midday, the hottest time of day, a strange time to be collecting water. There is no-one else about. The woman certainly doesn't expect to see Jesus sitting there and is even more surprised when he asks her for a drink. Her first words highlight the difference between them. "How can you, a Jew ask me, for a drink?" Jewish men did not talk to women, even those in their own family if they met them outside the home: it was forbidden. And Jews certainly didn't associate with Samaritans, whether male or female.

"If only you knew who I am" says Jesus, "you would ask me and I would give you living water". We might say 'running water'. Water that will never dry up. In the scriptures God himself is referred to in the book of Jeremiah as "the spring of living water". Water was an image that was also used for the Holy Spirit. In fact, the Bible is full of references to water and to thirst, like Psalm 42 (a version of which we have just sung): "As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When can I go and meet with God?" This is about more than just physical thirst. When we are thirsty and dehydrated we

desperately need water to revive us, but the psalmist speaks of a deeper longing, a longing of his whole being which makes him reach out to God.

What was this woman thirsting for? Does she realise what Jesus is offering? Whatever she thought Jesus was talking about, she brushes his words aside and answers in a literal sense. “But sir, you don’t even have a bucket, how are you going to get this water?” she says. Her answer is rather abrupt, and she certainly doesn’t rush to give Jesus a drink. Men don’t frighten her; she’s used to them. She’s had 5 husbands. What is she thinking? Aha, he wants a drink, but I’ve got a bucket; he hasn’t! Or is she just suspicious of this man who has struck up a conversation with her?

Whatever the circumstances and the reasons for her many marriages, whatever the rights and wrongs, she can’t have had an easy life. In fact, her life is probably a mess. As the conversation progresses, she is ready to raise an objection to everything Jesus says. I wonder how her husbands spoke to her? Was she someone who was always contradicted and treated with disdain and so learns to be on the offensive?

“Are you greater than our father Jacob who gave us this well?” she asks. Again, she highlights the difference between them. She’s probably just repeating what she’s been told all her life – *we* (Samaritans) are the descendants of Jacob, even though the Jews think only *they* are. If she’s hoping to provoke Jesus, it doesn’t work.

He still hasn’t got a drink from her, but he’s concerned about her need more than his own. Her whole life needs rehydrating. She’s startled when Jesus reveals that he knows about her 5 husbands. He doesn’t condemn her, and affirms the fact that she is telling the truth when she says she currently has no husband.

He is inviting conversation, rather than rebuffing her. She needs to know that God loves her and is interested in her life and wants to give her something better and so he listens to her, and takes her seriously. How does this man know all about me? she wonders. He must be some sort of prophet, so she turns to a religious subject, again pointing out how different they are: “Our fathers worshipped on this mountain, but you Jews claim that the place where we must worship is in Jerusalem”. That’s not what’s important to God, Jesus says. The place of worship is no longer a place, a temple, either in Jerusalem or anywhere else, but a person. Jesus is the place where people can meet with God.

The Father wants people to worship him in spirit and in truth he says. He wants her to know the truth of who he is and what he is offering her. Later, in his Gospel John records how Jesus said:

“If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him.” By this he meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were later to receive.  
(John 7: 37-39)

The start of what could be a turning point in her life is that she should believe in him. Jesus is waiting for a critical point in the conversation, and this is it. "I know that Messiah is coming" she says. Both Jews and Samaritans were waiting for Messiah, the one sent by God to be their saviour. Here at last is something she acknowledges they can both agree on. He senses that he has her full attention, and so reveals his true identity "The Messiah? It's me! The one talking to you."

At that point the disciples return, and she runs off, back to her village. Her head must have been spinning! The disciples are astonished when they find him talking with this woman.

Here she is, a loner, visiting the well when no-one else was about. Why? Because everyone in the village gave her a wide berth? Because she was despised? Someone who, because of her relationships, was in breach of the law and so was out of touch both with God and her community. And yet in Jesus, she found someone who didn't take from her, didn't condemn her, but offered her something. It was an everyday task for her to collect water, because without water we can't survive. But life is about more than just surviving. He wanted to give her more: a new life, what he called "eternal life." He didn't argue with her, but listened to her and talked to her with respect, and when the right moment came, even revealing himself to her as the Christ.

If you read on, you find that she goes back to her village and excitedly tells them about Jesus. Instead of dismissing her story, they believe her, they persuade Jesus to stay with them for another 2 days, and many become believers. She becomes an unlikely evangelist. The villagers must recognise that something has happened to her, she has had a profound encounter, otherwise why would they bother to come out and invite Jesus to stay? She's made a wonderful discovery, which she wants to share. I like to think that her life changes so completely that she becomes the centre of that community, reintegrated into village life.

This is a conversation for those who feel they are the outsiders, or those who just feel their life is a mess and they don't know where to start to put it right. It tells us that whatever objection we put up, Jesus waits patiently until we are ready to listen to him and to respond. Above all it's a reminder to us all that Jesus knows us.

He knows our deepest need and he wants to meet that need. When we move away from him, our lives become dry. Dehydration is a killer. We need to keep in touch with the one who can refresh our lives with living water, by the presence of his Holy Spirit. Living water which bubbles up to eternal life, filling us to overflowing so that it not only fills us, but overflows to others. This life is not something distant or something we have to wait for. Jesus wants to meet with us, so that we can have this life, right now. May we all know that reality for ourselves.