

Sermon 12 March 2023 Woman at the well

John 4:13-26

There was a centuries old feud between the Jews and the Samaritans, but the quickest way from Judea to Galilee lay through Samaria, which is why Jesus was taking that route. Just out of the town of Sychar there stands to this day the well known as Jacob's Well. It was here that Jesus sat down to rest. His disciples had gone ahead to buy some food in the Samaritan town.

As Jesus sat there, a Samaritan woman came to the well. Jesus asked her to give him a drink. She was quite taken aback by his request. 'I am a Samaritan,' she said, 'You are a Jew. How is it that you ask me for a drink?' Bottom line, Jews and Samaritans don't mix.

Few stories in the Gospels show us so much about the character of Jesus. Firstly, it shows the real humanness of Jesus. Jesus was tired and needed a rest. Jesus on the one hand was super-human, but on the other hand he had feelings just like you and me.

It shows us his warmth and kindness. Normally, the Samaritan woman would not have conversed with a Jew but she obviously felt comfortable in his presence. She didn't feel judged and condemned as she would have if it had been any other male Jew.

It shows us Jesus as the breaker down of barriers. The quarrel between the Jews and the Samaritans went back a long way. It was small wonder that the Samaritan woman was astonished that Jesus, a Jew, should speak to her. But then Jesus broke the mould, didn't he?

But there was still another way in which Jesus was breaking down the barriers. The Samaritan was a woman. The strict Rabbis forbade a Rabbi to greet a woman in public. A Rabbi might not even speak to his own wife or daughter or sister in public. There were even Rabbis who were called 'the bruised and bleeding Rabbis' because they shut their eyes when they saw a woman on the street and so walked into walls! Hard to believe. For a Rabbi to be seen talking to a woman in public was the end of his reputation, and yet Jesus spoke to this woman. Not only was she a woman but she was a woman of doubtful character, because it is revealed that she has had 5 husbands and is now living with a partner.

But this didn't stop Jesus from making her acquaintance. Here is Jesus breaking down all sorts of barriers. Here is Jesus living out the true message of tolerance, compassion and probably most importantly non-judgment. There is so much we can learn from this episode.

I want to focus for a moment on another aspect of this incident, and let me begin by sharing a story. In 1887 a seven-year-old girl named Helen Keller lived in Alabama, USA, but she was not an ordinary little girl. She was blind, deaf and dumb. Helen lost her sight and hearing as the result of an illness when she was about one and a half years old. Since she could no longer hear, she soon lost her ability to imitate sounds and thus to speak. Yet before Helen died, she would graduate from university with honours, become a widely acclaimed author and an inspiration to handicapped people the world over.

The story behind her amazing achievement dates back to a Spring day in 1887 when a 20-year-old woman named Annie Sullivan came to Alabama to be Helen's private teacher. One of the first things she did was to take Helen for a walk in the warm Spring sunshine. They came to a tap and Annie placed Helen's hand under the tap and turned it on. As the water gushed over one hand, she spelled into her other hand the word *water*. Immediately Helen associated the wonderful cool something that was flowing over her hand

with the letters 'w-a-t-e-r.' That living word awakened something in her soul; it gave her hope and joy. Her experience with water that day changed her life and what an inspiration she became to millions of people.

Helen Keller's experience is similar to the experience of the Samaritan woman at the well. In both cases, the teacher used water to communicate an important message. In the case of Jesus, he told the Samaritan woman in response to her observation that he didn't have a bucket to draw water from the well that, *'The water that I give will become a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.'*

Let me remind you that water is life-giving. A relationship with Jesus brings a whole new perspective on life.

As a result of the woman's experience with Jesus, many others became believers. Jesus was persuaded to stay on at the village for two days and I quote from a passage a little further on from our Gospel reading, *'So he stayed on for two days, long enough for many to hear his message and believe.'* You could say that the Samaritan woman was our first missionary.

Now no one expects you to go forth to preach, teach and spread the gospel but through living a life as a worshipping and service-giving Christian, we can all play a part in spreading the good word; we can all play a part in having a positive influence on others.

I remind you of the story of St Francis of Assisi who was paying a visit to this town. A young monk was assigned to accompany him. He was so very excited about having the opportunity to spend time with the great man and to learn from him. He was especially looking forward to hearing him preach to the crowds.

The day came and the two of them set off through the busy town. Everywhere they went, they stopped to chat with people but not once did Francis actually address a crowd. The young monk was somewhat disappointed and at the end of the day he expressed his disappointment to Francis, to which Francis replied, *'My son, we have preached as we have walked. People have observed us as we have interacted with them. They have learned more from that than any preaching we might have done.'*

All too often as Christians we let ourselves down through how we treat one another, and I think being judgmental would feature quite heavily in that regard. Unfortunately, Christians are seen as being quite judgmental. It is, of course, a generalisation and a perception, but there is invariably a reason for a perception.

Jesus had all sorts of cultural and societal reasons for treating the Samaritan woman with a degree of judgement. The fact that he didn't undoubtedly played a big part in her accepting him for whom he really was. There is a very important lesson there for us.

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