

The woman at the well – John 4:5-42

May the words of my mouth, and the thoughts and meditations of all our hearts, be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Introduction – assumptions can mislead.

We were in Malta recently. It felt surprisingly familiar (the weather was better though). English language everywhere. Driving on the left. Even red post boxes.

That's why, when we sat down to eat, we assumed tap water would be freely available. It wasn't. Bottled water is normal there — even in homes.

It was a small thing. But it reminded me how quickly we assume that what feels familiar must mean the same thing.

I wonder whether we do the same with today's story in John 4. It's familiar. We think we know it. Even if this is the first time we've heard today's story, we think we know this woman. Many traditional commentators portray the woman as immoral. But what if some of first impressions or assumptions are wrong?

Entering the scene – the woman's perspective.

The adventurer, Bear Grylls, has written a book *The Greatest Story Ever Told*. It's the story of Jesus told from the perspective of the first eyewitnesses. The book includes today's story of the woman at the well, as if Thomas, one of the disciples was watching and reflecting on what happened.

So I wondered, why shouldn't we consider the opening scene from the woman's perspective?

The woman has already used that morning's water. More water is needed as there is still much cleaning and cooking to do. But it is the sixth hour, noon, almost the hottest time of the day.

As she walks to the well, she keeps to the cooler shadows in the narrow passageways. She wonders: Who will help her lift the full water jar onto her back this time? Will any of the other women be at the well at this hour?

The woman enters the clearing and stops. She keeps still.

A man is sitting by the well. She doesn't recognise him as someone from her town. She looks around. He appears to be alone. Why isn't he sitting under the shade of the sycamore trees? What does he want? Is she safe?

She still hasn't moved. Then the man turns towards her and speaks, gently and slowly, "Give me a drink."

She is startled. He's a Jew – his accent gives him away.

Instead of turning away, the woman declares, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?"

Jesus' purposeful approach – Divine initiative

It may help us to step back for a moment and see what is really happening here.

This isn't simply a stranger asking a woman for a drink.

This encounter is more surprising than it first appears. Whilst Jews and Samaritans shared ancient roots in the people of Israel, over centuries they had become deeply divided. They disagreed about where God should be worshipped — the Jews in Jerusalem, the Samaritans on Mount Ger-ih-zim. By the time of Jesus there was real hostility between them.

We're told that Jews do not associate with Samaritans – they certainly don't share the same drinking vessels.

For this reason, many Jews, especially Pharisees, travelling between Judea and Galilee deliberately avoided Samaria. They would travel the longer routes to the west or the east.

"But Jesus had to go through Samaria," we're told in the verse preceding today's passage. Perhaps Jesus is making a point to the Pharisees. He didn't have to go through Samaria in the geographical sense. Yet Jesus comes this way deliberately, even if his own disciples were concerned that they would have to spend several days and nights in hostile territory.

There is another boundary here as well. When the disciples return later, we're told they were surprised to find Jesus speaking with her. In that culture it was not considered appropriate for a man to begin a public conversation with a woman he did not know.

What looks like a simple request for water crosses several boundaries at once — ethnic, religious, and social. The meeting between Jesus and this woman wasn't an accident.

Misplaced assumptions.

This is where our assumptions begin to creep in.

To us, Jesus is not a stranger in this story. But the woman is. We know almost nothing about her. And yet the remarkable thing is this — she may be a stranger to us, but she is not a stranger to Jesus. The woman sees a stranger; Jesus sees a person, loved by God.

But how do we see her?

When many people hear this story, they quickly assume they know what kind of woman she is. Later in the conversation Jesus reveals that she has had five husbands. And often the assumption is made that she must somehow be immoral.

The reality may have been very different. It was common for women to marry young. A woman might have been widowed more than once. In that culture women rarely initiated divorce. She could have been abandoned and left economically vulnerable. We simply do not know her story.

This raises a question for us: How often do we judge someone before we know their story?

But Jesus does not condemn her. This ties in well with the last verse in last week's passage, John 3. "For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him."

Neither should we be so quick to judge and condemn.

Revelation and transformation

Jesus knows the woman's story, and he offers her living water.

In the Old Testament God himself is sometimes described as the source of living water. The prophet Jeremiah speaks of God as "the spring of living water." So, when Jesus offers living water here, he is offering something far deeper than the water drawn from Jacob's well. But at first, the woman doesn't understand and doubts Jesus because he has no bucket to draw water from the well, let alone from a stream.

In John's Gospel, water appears again and again. Water for purification becomes wine at Cana. Water is linked with new birth in the conversation with Nicodemus. Water that people hoped would bring healing. And now, at this well, Jesus speaks about living water, water that becomes a spring of eternal life.

She hears the first part – she wants this water that will conquer her thirst and lighten her daily grind. She doesn't appear to be interested in becoming a spring for others, not yet.

The conversation now turns in a more personal direction. Jesus asks her to call her husband – and gently reveals that he already knows the story of her life.

The woman realises that she is not speaking with an ordinary traveller. Her tone changes. "Sir," she says, "I can see that you are a prophet." She is no longer challenging him. Now she asks the question that has divided Jews and Samaritans for centuries: where should we worship God?

Perhaps we understand that type of question more than we realise. We too can become very concerned about where and how we worship – the place, the style, the form.

But Jesus points to something deeper. The Father seeks those who will worship him in spirit and in truth.

The question for us is not first about the place of worship, but about the authenticity of our worship.

The woman then speaks of the Messiah who will one day come and make all things clear. And Jesus says to her, "I, the one speaking to you — I am he."

And suddenly everything changes.

She leaves her water jar and runs back to the town. The unnamed woman at the well in Sychar becomes the first recorded evangelist.

"Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman's testimony."

Conclusion

And that may be the greatest surprise in the story. The woman turns out to be someone God was seeking. He had an important role for her.

John places two very different encounters side by side. Last week we heard about a respected religious leader, Nicodemus, who came to Jesus by night and struggled to understand. Today, an unnamed Samaritan woman meets Jesus at noon, receives living water, and becomes a witness to her whole town. "Come and see."

Perhaps the real question this story leaves with us is this: how do we see people around us? As strangers we quickly judge — or as people God is seeking?

And I wonder, does the woman at the well represent you? Jesus sees you — and he wants to meet you. He's not going to condemn you. He offers you living water, gushing up to eternal life.

Let us pray:

Lord Jesus Christ,
Whilst you were thirsty you met a woman at a well
and offered her living water that leads to eternal life.

Forgive us for the times we judge others too quickly
or fail to see the people you are seeking.
Give us hearts that reflect your compassion.

Help us to worship the Father in spirit and in truth.

Thank you for your living water,
help us to share it with others that they too may come and see.

Amen.

James Parsons, Parish of Tidenham
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