

Sermon for Holy Trinity Geneva on Sunday 8 March 2026, the 3rd Sunday of Lent.

Texts: Exodus 17.1-7; Roman 5.1-11; John 4. 5-42

Jesus and the Samaritan Woman

If you could meet one person in the Gospels who had an encounter with Jesus, who would you choose?

In my case, I'd love to meet the Samaritan woman who features in our gospel reading today. You might think it's a surprising choice. But I'd love to explore with her how her remarkable encounter with Jesus completely transformed her life, so that she was able to go from being a social outcast to become the person who utterly transformed her community. It would be so good to her at first hand from this courageous, sparky woman, just what it meant to her.

But I'd also like to meet her because I believe that her encounter with Jesus gives us a glimpse of that the incarnation of Jesus really means for us and for our world. For in this meeting between two such radically different people at the well, we're given an insight into the significance of God becoming human and just what it means for us. Through their encounter, we glimpse how Jesus, the living water, brings hope and joy to the world and shows us how we, in turn, can help share this with others whom we meet.

We start with Jesus arriving tired and thirsty after a longish journey with his disciples and taking a moment to rest at a well in the heat of the day. His disciples head off to buy food in the town and he is, for a moment, alone. It's not any old well but Jacob's well – reputedly created by that great patriarch to provide water for himself, his extensive family and livestock and now available centuries later, as a gift for the community.

As he rested there, Jesus would have been all too aware of its history, and his own link in that history. Wells have always been a place of encounter where people stop to talk as they draw water and water their livestock and can be indeed places where love is found – think of Jacob meeting the great love of his life, Rachel as she watered her father's animals at the well.

But wells are also places where human conflicts, bitterness and cruelty are exposed. Think of the sad history in medieval England and elsewhere, when, at times of tension, Jewish communities would be accused of poisoning the wells. They remind us of radial inequalities where it is the woman and sometimes children today who have to make long and often dangerous journeys to collect the water for the family. In this story, we sense, at the well, the bitter conflict and hostility between the Jewish and Samaritan people and also the experience of being a pariah and outcast. It is very significant that the woman is collecting her water alone in the heat of the day, not in the companionable fellowship of other women at the cool of evening or early morning.

As Jesus sits, resting, the Samaritan woman arrives to collect water. Even before he makes his request to her, we notice something profoundly important. And that it that the extraordinary dialogue which begins with Jesus' request to the Samaritan woman for a drink, arises from Jesus's needs. We know from his temptations in the desert, that Jesus was all too aware that he could turn stones to bread, or even, as his ancestors Moses had done, strike a rock from which water would gush out. Yet he desists and in this we glimpse something of the God's incarnation lived out – God in Jesus becoming completely human as we are, including sharing our hunger and our thirst. Yet it is from those needs, that Jesus will transform lives.

Then Jesus makes his astonishing request to the woman, "Give me a drink". It's astonishing in every way. First of all, strict rules on conduct between men and women in Jewish society at that time meant that a man should never speak to a woman in public. For a Jewish Rabbi and a woman to be seen talking together was unthinkable. Then, to make it even worse, she was one of the hated Samaritans, with who the Jews had a mutual antipathy and here he was asking her to give him as drink – something which would render him ritually unclean, Finally, as if that wasn't bad enough. we imagine that something of the woman's disreputable lifestyle was probably evident in the way she dressed and presented herself. Never has the request. "Give me a drink" been so loaded with broken taboos.

Yet from that request, a deep and fruitful conversation between Jesus and the Samaritan woman develops. It starts almost with the degree of playful banter that also characterises Jesus' conversation with the Syro-Phoenician story who begs him to cure her daughter. But just as in that story, something deep is going on both within the woman and also in Jesus.

Jesus uses the woman's amazed response, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" as way to lead her on a journey of profound discovery as he first tells her of the living water which he is offering to her, and eventually reveals himself to her as the Messiah. In the process, she learns to recognise and acknowledge the reality of her own life and its messiness. When Jesus tells her to go and fetch her husband so that he too may share in this gift of the living water, she is able to say to him, "I have no husband". To which Jesus replies, "You are right in saying, "I have no husband", for you have had five husbands and the one you have now is not your husband". Yet instead of condemning her, Jesus affirms her in acknowledging the truth. Because is honest about the reality of her life, she recognises her own needs and can receive the gift he is offering, the living water which is God's spirit coursing through her.

And it is here where we see a complete contrast to the Israelites as we hear today of their revolt against Moses as they camp in the wilderness at Rephidim on their journey to the Promised Land. Tired, hot and thirsty with no evident sight of any water at hand to bring them relief, they turn on Moses in fury. Moses is terrified, convinced they are about to kill him. On one level, we can sympathise with them deeply. Being exhausted and thirsty is no joke and it is very frightening if you believe you cannot water your livestock or give water to your children. Yet there is something in this story about the abuse of human power which can happen as we fail to

recognise God in our lives or to trust Him. They force Moses to do, what which we know from the temptations of Jesus we should not do which is to put God to the test to suit our purposes. It sheds a light of us on how we, when we are running dry spiritually, relying on our own efforts, can be tempted to treat God as a meal ticket to make our lives more comfortable rather than recognise in Him, the very source of life itself,

In contrast, the Samaritan woman has no sense of either status or entitlement. Yet rather than being overwhelmed as Jesus leads her to the point where she has to acknowledge and name the chaos of her own life, she is filled with joy. She recognises that in Jesus she has indeed encountered that stream of living water – that life of the Spirit which is now bubbling up in her. Just as Mary Magdalene will hasten to the disciples after the resurrection and proclaim, “I have seen the Lord,” so this Samaritan woman, leaves everything including her water pot, and rushes to tell all the members of her community, “Come and see a man who told me everything I have every done. He cannot be the Messiah, can he?” Despite her reputation, her words, her appearance and the spirit of joy radiating from her, must have touched them and stirred up a powerful curiosity to come and see. We’re told that many Samaritans believed in Jesus as a result. They ask him to stay with them and many come to faith. This woman has brought the life Jesus offers to them and in this, we see the living water spreading, touching and transforming the lives of many.

In this extraordinary encounter between the Samaritan woman and Jesus, we’re given a glimpse of what the incarnation, that is, God in Jesus, becoming human for our sakes, really means in practice. For it helps us to see how God comes to us in Christ, in the ordinariness of our daily lives. In our case and in our context in Geneva, it’s not at a well but in all the places where we gather in our daily lives - at work, in the community, at church and in our own homes. We encounter God coming as one of us, suffering hunger, thirst, cold and tiredness. We experience God in Jesus acknowledging His needs, “Give me a drink” and through letting us minister to Him, opening a path so that we may in turn open ourselves to him and learn to see ourselves more truthfully yet without fear. For we see that he offers us, in himself that which our souls deep down long for, that living water which wells up in us for eternal life.

We also glimpse the significance of the incarnation of Jesus through the Samaritan woman, as he challenges and overturns, the deepest taboos which had kept people trapped with the division between those regarded as pure and those condemned as beyond the pale. The fifth century theologian, Gregory of Nazianzus famously proclaimed that “That which Christ has not embraced is not redeemed”. In the story of the woman of Samaria we see this reality of the incarnation literally lived out – God in Jesus entering into the lives of those who in different forms in every age, we condemn as ‘unclean’. As he does so, he redeems them and in the process, challenges our misguided claims to righteousness.

As we reflect on this story today, I pray that it will help each one of us to think afresh what God becoming incarnate for us in Jesus means in the context of our daily lives. I pray that as we reflect, we may be drawn deeply onto the love of the One who

offers us life in all its fullness – the living water of the Spirit and that we may experience it welling up in our lives and in that of this church of Holy Trinity.

And I also pray that as the Samaritan woman, filled with the Spirit rushed to share her joy with her community and invited them to “Come and meet the One who knows us more deeply than we know ourselves,” so we too may be conduits of God’s love, reaching out to others so they too may be touched by and transformed by Christ, the living water.

Amen

Canon Daphne Green