

## **Reading**

John 4:5-30

The Samaritan Woman at the well.

## **Sermon**

This story from John's gospel is one which is well known, and rightly so. It's a very rich passage with many insights for us and much to give us thought.

And yet its very familiarity can cause us to skim over it and miss much of that richness.

For example, it offers us a familiar picture of Jesus – He is the living water.

It also reminds us that He is not simply a wandering rabbi, but the Messiah.

We could also use this passage to speak about the breaking down of cultural barriers; of the nature of forgiveness; about the need for honest confession; about the 'right sort' of life to lead.

But in this short reflection, I want us to think about confusion.

Because this passage is full of it.

Jesus is talking about water; the woman thinks he just wants a drink.

Jesus is speaking about satisfying a thirst with living water; she's thinking about indoor plumbing.

Jesus makes a simple request, "Go, call your husband, and come back," and the woman's soul is laid bare.

Every step of this conversation doesn't lead to where the woman expects or, indeed, to where she would comfortably go.

But is this really confusion?

Certainly it is if we follow one definition of the word which is "to disturb in mind and purpose".

There's no doubt that this woman is confused. What Jesus reveals of himself and of her character are disturbing and uncomfortable to her. And her purpose of drawing water is definitely disrupted.

And I want to suggest that this should be typical of *our* reaction to an encounter with the gospel.

And if we consider the root of the word confusion – going against our foundations, that which we rely on for sense and understanding, then that should indeed be one purpose of the gospel.

So let's look at this woman's conversation with Jesus and consider how we might use *her* reaction to understand our own and how we might use *her* awakened understanding to draw our lessons from the gospel Jesus brought.

We begin, not with the words spoken, but with the setting in which this conversation took place.

I hope you realise that this is a conversation that should never have taken place, for all sorts of reasons.

Jesus, a Jew, is in Samaria, home of an unclean people, according to the Jews. Once close brothers to the Jews, but now outcasts and sinners, having turned from the 'true' worship of the true God. To say that there was bad feeling between Jews and Samaritans would be to understate it considerably.

Remember the story of the Good Samaritan? Its shock value lies in that strained, and indeed often broken, relationship between Jews and Samaritans.

And we have another factor at play here. Social norms of the time would have frowned upon this unchaperoned meeting, and for a Jew to meet with a Samaritan would be unthinkable.

But in this lonely meeting we also have an even more significant factor. Water was generally drawn in the cool of the day, not in the glare of the midday sun. So even here we get a deeper sense of the outcast that this woman is – not just shunned by Jews, but even by her own people to the point that she has the courage to come to the well only when there is no-one else around.

And so the conversation begins.

In the most unlikely and counter-cultural circumstances, Jesus meets with her.

And let me suggest that here we might learn our first counter-foundational lesson.

Jesus doesn't only meet with us in the 'properness' of church, or in the 'holiness' of prayer, or in the 'righteousness' of reading His word, but in the messiness of our life; in the desperate situations; in the places and at the times that are inconvenient and yet when and where it is perhaps most needed.

And so the exchange of words begins.

Oh, I would love to take you through each speech word by word for each is ripe with meaning. Each is just waiting to be peeled apart to reveal truths and challenges and hope for each of us. But we need to content ourselves today with the bigger picture.

And so we think of the progress of this conversation.

How each question from this women is met, not with simple explanation, but with a tantalising nugget of information that spawns more questions.

And how each answer never seems to match the question, yet draws the questioner, and us, along a path where the answers we really need to get to are lying waiting to be heard.

And the conversation gets deeply personal and not in a nice way. It's not about how wonderful we are and 'let's talk about me!' It digs into areas we hide with half-truths. It exposes the awkwardness and the messiness.

And perhaps this turn of events *is* confusing.

"How come this is suddenly about me?"

"What's this difficult part of my life got to do with anything?"

And our mind is disturbed and the purpose of our questions is no longer clear

And so we learn another lesson.

The gospel, as we read of in scripture, as an encounter with God, doesn't make us feel 'warm and fuzzy'; it doesn't allow us to brag about ourself.

Rather, it exposes us; makes us feel uncomfortable; challenges us and whenever we think we have it nailed down and making sense, it wriggles away from us and takes us to another place where we are further exposed and challenged.

But it doesn't leave us there.

Consider where this conversation ended up.

Having been challenged and exposed we are given something; a gift.

Jesus didn't leave this woman shamed by her adultery, condemned by her half-truths, confused by the import and sense of His words.

No, He left her with a new hope; a chance for a new beginning; a revelation of who He was.

And so the woman went off, with her own conversation to share with others; and to challenge them.

"Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done," she proclaimed. There is that eagerness to share her new understanding; to bring others through that same exposure but not so that it may end in ridicule and shame but with their own sense of new hope and excitement.

But notice as well her final question. "He cannot be the messiah, can he?"

Is this doubt or a change of heart or an incomplete understanding?

Let me suggest that this question is what lies at the very heart of *our* considerations.

Jesus is willing to meet us in all aspects of our life – the worshipful and the woeful; the majestic and the messy.

And when He meets with us, with care and love, He will peel away the worldly protection we build around ourself; our armour of self-righteousness and of justification.

And He will expose us, not to ridicule and condemnation, but to love and healing and forgiveness and new understanding, even the hope and promise of new life. For that is the gospel, the good news that He speaks to us about and wishes us to hear.

And what about us? What are we left with after reading this story?

The same question as the woman had!

“He cannot be the messiah, can he?”

It’s a question that only *faith* can answer.

I said at the beginning that this passage is about confusion. Confusion in the sense that what we know and rely on will be questioned by the gospel of Jesus Christ; and it will be disturbed. If it is not then we have to question our reading of scripture, our understanding of God.

Have we been exposed and challenged by the gospel?

Have we discovered love and forgiveness through it?

But most of all, have we been called to respond in faith, trusting in God?

“He cannot be the messiah, can he?”

How would you answer?