



**Sermon preached by Richard Lewney on 8<sup>th</sup> March 2026**

**Readings:** John 4.5-26; John 4.27-42

*Part 1*

It's hot. It's noon. It's dry, dusty. It's the dry season. There'll be no rain for months yet. You've been walking for hours with the sun beating down on you. You lick your parched lips and they taste of salt from the sweat that trickles down your face. You're dirty. You're hungry. You're tired out. Above all, you're so, so thirsty.

There's hardly anyone around: people stay indoors at this time of day. The people you do see are wary. Strangers. Not one of us. A woman shepherds her children into her house and looks back over her shoulder. There's nothing here for you: no hospitality, no refreshment, no human contact at all.

Jesus is worn out. His disciples leave him to rest and go to try to buy food.

The woman makes her way towards the well. She sees the man slumped by the well and stiffens. There's no one else around. Should she go home and come back at another time? But it's hot, and she's walked too far to return empty-handed. She takes the risk and starts to fill her jar with water.

The man looks up. She lowers her eyes. A woman does not meet the gaze of a strange man. 'Give me a drink of water.' She hears that his voice is hoarse, his mouth is dry. She hears from the way he speaks that he is a Jew from Galilee.

What should she do? You must provide water for a traveller in a country where water could be a matter of life and death. But you don't talk to a strange man with no introduction, no chaperone.

And a Jewish man at that. Jews and Samaritans, cousins with a long history of division. After all, this is the well of Jacob, claimed as patriarch by both tribes. But Jews and Samaritans have gone separate ways, each claiming their own mountain as the centre of true worship of God.

Will she leave? Will she submissively offer the water in silence? But this woman has more to her than that. He broke the code. Very well.

She looks up. 'How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?'

He ignores the gulf between them. Instead, he has something to offer her. 'If you only knew the gift God has for you and who you're speaking to, you would ask me, and I would give you living water.' Living water. It means fresh water, running water. There's no running water anywhere in this season. Just the water in the well. She looks again at him. Didn't *he* just ask *her* for water. He has no way to get the water from the well. Where's this water going to come from? 'Anyone who drinks this water will soon become thirsty again. But those who drink the water I give will never be thirsty again. It will become a fresh, bubbling spring within them, giving them eternal life.'

Just imagine, say, living right by a stream and not having to carry all your water in a jar back from this well. 'Give me this water.' But now his weariness seems to have lifted. His gaze is alert, uncomfortable. 'Go call your husband and come back.' She looks away. 'I have no husband.' 'That's right. You've had five husbands and the man you have now is not your husband.'

In a moment all the hurt of her years of loss and rejection rushes up at her. It wasn't supposed to be like this. Once she had been a bride full of the anticipation of youth. But husband after husband had set her aside.

Now she sees. The man at the well has the gift of God to speak words of truth, words that expose what we would rather hide. She tries to withdraw. You're a Jew, I'm a Samaritan. Different mountains, remember? She wants to go, but something about the man stops her from leaving.

Salvation is from the Jews, but it reaches out to anyone who will worship the Father in spirit and in truth. Jew, Samaritan, different mountains? 'The hour is coming, and is now here, when none of that will matter.' 'When the Messiah will come?' 'Yes, I am he. The time has come.'

### *Part 2*

Last week we read about another person who met Jesus. Do you remember Nicodemus? A religious leader, a teacher of Israel Jesus calls him. He's a man of power, worried about his reputation. Not like today's woman. She's a nobody, a foreigner even, with no reputation to keep safe. He chose to come to Jesus, to check him out. She's just doing her chores, expecting nothing when Jesus approaches *her*. Nicodemus is puzzled, struggling to fit what Jesus says into his system, into his theology. She's excited, embracing this good news. When he leaves, he's cautious, keeps his visit secret perhaps. She rushes headlong to tell her neighbours. His journey towards faith in Jesus is a slow burn - we'll read more of him later in John's gospel. Hers is spontaneous and joyful.

The returning disciples catch the end of the encounter but miss its significance. 'Eat something', they say to Jesus. But Jesus is no longer hungry and exhausted. He's full of life. Has someone given him food? 'My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work'. But *this* wasn't a place for building the kingdom of God. It was a pit stop, on the way. A place to get out of as quickly as possible. Samaria, for goodness' sake.

It's still hot. But now here comes the woman with a crowd. There's excitement. There's a kind of living water, overflowing, running down the street. Lives are being changed by the encounter with the Messiah. Samaritans are recognising him as the Saviour, the Saviour of the world. And he stayed there for two days. In Samaria.

Where are we in this story?

Are we the woman, resigned to a life of disappointment. Surprised and liberated when Jesus names our secret fear. Delighted when he pulls down the barrier that we and others have put up and which gets in the way of God's loving embrace?

Are we the woman's neighbours, open to learn from the experience and testimony of others. Ready to find the gift of God in an unexpected place. Determined to find out for ourselves if this can really be true. Ready to commit ourselves as disciples when we have heard for ourselves?

Or are we the disciples, unable to see past the cultural and religious barriers of our time. Writing off people and places where, surely, God cannot be at work? Too tired to notice the opportunity that God provides for a conversation about things that really matter.

Come and see a man who told me everything about my life.

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