



Sermon preached by Revd Dr Robert Pope on 12th March 2023

Readings: 1-10 Exodus 17:1-7; John 4:5-42

There is much which could be commented on in our Gospel reading this morning. I would like to explore the reading through the lens of two verses. When challenged by the woman that he could not possibly offer 'living water' because he has no bucket to draw water from the well, and questioned whether he thinks he is greater than Jacob who have the well, Jesus responds:

'Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life' (vv. 13-14).

I'm going to take three headings: Being found out; Being transformed; Being with Christ.

Being found out

Our Gospel reading this morning describes an encounter between Jesus and a woman. As so often, this is an unnamed woman, a woman who is known only as a Samaritan. She is fetching water from the well in the middle of the day, a time when the sun would have been at its hottest. Some commentators suggest that she had done so deliberately, in the hope – or perhaps the knowledge – that there would have been no one else there. Why would she want to go when there was no one else there?

We don't know, but as the story progresses we find out something about her. When told by Jesus 'Go, call your husband and come back' she answers 'I have no husband'. Then Jesus divulges a hidden knowledge about her: she has had five husbands and she is currently living with a man who is not her husband.

Some have suggested that the woman was an immoral person, that this record shows some kind of deviancy on her part and that this accounted for her being an outcast, shunned by the rest of the community and that that would explain why she went to the well in the middle of the day.

I want to suggest that, rather than a greater sinner than those around her, she was more likely to have been a victim of social mores. We do not know what happened to her five husbands. They might have died; they might have divorced her; some might have died, others might have divorced her. She would have been unable to divorce any of them. Either way, she would have been left defenseless and with no source of income. She would have had no option but to seek a man to look after her. The idea that she was living with a man without being married would have been scandalous, perhaps, but again it would not have been her choice or her decision.

Perhaps she was used to people saying this to her, but her reply suggests that it was a matter that was not out in the open. 'Sir, I see you are a prophet'. She acknowledges that there is something different about Jesus; she holds to the idea that the Messiah is coming, and the first part of our reading ended with Jesus telling her he is the Messiah.

What we have here is the woman being found out. She might be going to the well in the middle of the day in order to avoid the taunts, the stares, the vilification of others who might know of her plight but had no pity for her. Being caught out is not a pleasant experience.

The natural response to being caught out is to try to deflect: 'Never mind what I might have done – have you seen what he's doing over there?' Or perhaps it is to deny responsibility – 'it wasn't me it was all those others!' Or perhaps it is to ask what all the fuss is about: 'it wasn't all that bad a thing I've done'. The woman offers no excuse. She knows her life and perhaps she had heard the accusations against her

so many times that they meant nothing. Perhaps she felt no need to justify herself. Perhaps she was simply intrigued by this stranger who seemed to know her (or at least to know about her).

And yet although Jesus catches her out, he knows of her past and present, he does not condemn her, he does not berate her, instead he talks to her about her hope: the Messiah is coming.

Perhaps you can remember a time you were 'caught out'. Perhaps as a child – maybe as an adult – you did something which you hoped no one would have noticed, you hoped no one would find out. And then you were confronted by it. Maybe a parent or a relative, a teacher or a friend. Or maybe a total stranger. It was probably not a pleasant experience! And it would not have been a pleasant experience for the woman, except that Jesus is more accommodating than she would have expected, and the revelation that he knows her, he *really* knows her, becomes the opportunity for a further conversation and even an opportunity for transformation.

Being transformed

In one sense the most surprising – or perhaps most shocking – aspect of the story is how unphased the woman is when Jesus seems to know all about her. In fact, she is later seen giving testimony that 'He told me everything I have ever done'.

I don't know about you, but I find that phrase more than slightly disturbing! I am not sure what I would make of someone telling me everything I had ever done: and I am not sure I would want anyone knowing either! And yet, for this woman, this meeting with Jesus, this meeting with the one who had told her everything she had ever done, the one who seems to have confided in her that he is the coming Messiah – or the Messiah arrived – has a transforming effect on her.

If it is true that we started the story with this woman sneaking out in the middle of the day in order to avoid the crowds, it ends with her going about town deliberately attracting attention in order to tell others about this extraordinary encounter she had at the well.

Of course, it surely is not the invitation – or the threat – to meet someone who will know everything that they have ever done which attracts her fellow townsfolk. Instead, what she testifies to is the conversation she had with him. 'I know that Messiah is coming,' she said. 'I am he, the one who is speaking to you,' he replied. That he had initially shown that he knew her life story drew her to him as a prophet and into a conversation that changed her life.

And the townsfolk too, although 'many Samaritans' – the account reads – believed because of her testimony, they asked Jesus to stay among them and he stayed for two days. In being with him, they too are transformed: 'many more believed because of his word. They said to the woman, "it is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Saviour of the world'. They too had been transformed because they had been with Christ.

Being with Christ

And so we are left with the bare-bones of an encounter. A nameless woman whose life has been hard to say the least, meets Jesus, enters into a conversation with him and finds herself transformed. We know very little about the encounter. Much more must have been said. But what we do know is that for this woman, she has met the Messiah, the one she believed to be coming and therefore the one in whom she hoped. We also know that the testimony of the people was that they had met 'the Saviour of the world'. Life could not be quite the same again.

And in our day, we look also to our continual transformation as we are conformed to the likeness of Christ. We do this as we spend time in prayer or as we listen for God's voice when we read Scripture. We do this as we look to our neighbours – those close and far off – and see God's image reflected back. We do this as we nurture love and compassion, as we seek to be doers as well as hearers of the Word.

Because it is here, when we encounter Jesus, or perhaps better when Jesus breaks in to our lives, we find the one who gives us the water that, from a spring, with gush forth with new life, with eternal life, with life in all its fulness.