

“MEETING THE MAIN MAN”
Fancy A Drink? – The Woman At The Well
John 4:1-30

The first part of this is a story which wasn't preached at Wade Street Church on 4th September, although I have used it in other places on occasions. It fills in a bit of background and challenges the usual interpretation of this story as an account of Jesus' meeting with an immoral woman. There are other ways of reading it – and here's one. If you don't want to read it, skip to the end of the italicised section.

*She could only go at certain times – when there was no-one else around. There had been a time when she'd just tried to brazen it out, walk along with the rest of them, her head held high, her heart full of a kind of defiant pride. Why not, after all? It wasn't her fault: it was only the wagging tongues of others, the vivid imaginations of the villagers who saw her as the villain of the piece. But it had become clear that no-one wanted to talk to her – they wanted only to talk **about** her; in their little self-righteous huddles, the outrage boiling off them like steam, then their voices tailing away into whispers as she approached them. They always made sure that there was no room for her at the lip of the well until they'd all finished.*

She tried going along with the rest of them, tried ignoring it all, but in the end she'd given up making the effort and now she went only when she knew no-one else would be there. That meant at about noon-time, when it was almost too hot to move outside the shade of the buildings and the olive trees, when all the others were in the cool dark of their homes, sharing their midday food with husbands back from the fields.

Her man had come in too, but he knew he'd have to wait until she'd fetched the water before they could eat together. He'd turned up in the village a few weeks before, and it didn't take long for him to move in with Rebekah. Apparently – so the word was at the well – he had a wife up in Nain, but he never mentioned her, naturally, and Rebekah was glad of any company.

She'd been married too, of course. The first time it was wonderful – a handsome, clever young man who offered her a great future. Their families had been delighted with the match and they loved each other deeply. Each day brought new delights and new adventure in their life together. But then he'd died suddenly one autumn evening – choked on a fish bone as they ate together in the waning light, and by the time help arrived his breath had gone for ever.

Rebekah was distraught. Her life seemed ruined. In the depths of her grief – and without really knowing what she was doing – she'd taken up with Nathan – “God's gift”, the name meant, and she saw him as God's gift to her at a difficult time. She married again – with unseemly haste according to the women at the well. There was a slight chill in the reception she got when she went for water.

Nathan was a strange one, though. He soon tired of his wife's company and he'd go off in the evenings to spend time with the dice-throwers and wine-bibbers at the other end of the village. She never really knew what they got up to over there and she'd spend her evenings thinking of how wonderful it was the first time round. One night, Nathan did not come home and two days later they found what was left of him in a ditch. No-one ever found out how he'd got there, but that didn't stop the women at the well speculating.

Rebekah went off to stay with some relatives in Samaria, but soon found that living cramped up with your cousins, uncles and nephews in a couple of small houses was not ideal. Simeon particularly couldn't keep his eyes off her, then his hands, and then, well ... despite her protestations, by spring she was pregnant. They were married as soon as it was discovered, but she miscarried and Simeon was no longer interested. Her family seemed to turn against her and she was made to feel even more unwelcome. Back to Sychar.

Word had travelled ahead of her. The women at the well put their own gloss on it – she'd lost three husbands and a baby: God must be punishing her for something, and they had no wish to be tainted by her presence. Her still young face seemed much older now. The lines of grief and shame and anxiety criss-crossed it and rarely folded into anything other than a frown. She kept herself very much to herself, until one day Gideon turned up. He was around her age and had also lost a partner. He'd been married some years before, but his wife had died in childbirth, along with the child. Now he travelled around from village to village, doing odd jobs and trying to make a living. Their common sense of sadness initially made them natural companions but for a few months they re-discovered happiness in each other's company. Not long after their marriage, Gideon lost the fingers of his right hand in an accident involving a cart wheel he was repairing. He was now unable to work at all and depression set in. Despite the encouragements of his wife, he felt humiliated that he couldn't provide for Rebekah and one afternoon she came back from the market to discover Gideon hanging from a rafter. For the next few days you couldn't get near the well for gaggles of gossiping women – who'd all, of course, seen it coming; "Well, what do you expect – a woman with her past!"

"Her past", of course, was mostly in their imagination. She'd tried to do what was best. She'd needed to provide for herself. And she'd broken no law, breached no etiquette – other than not behaving as they did. But they were lucky – they still had their husbands, their families, their ordinary lives. She'd lost everything – not once, but several times.

And then she met Cassius: a Roman soldier not far off demob, but still, strangely, a bachelor. She met him by chance one day in the market and a conversation started up. They began to order their movements so that their paths crossed and soon they were seeing each other almost every day. It was a difficult relationship to sustain, and the attitude of the women at the well didn't help, but they really felt they loved each other – and Cassius even gave up the final opportunity of a commission so that he could stay and marry her.

He used his bonus to buy a small parcel of land and when his colleagues went home he stayed in Sychar. But after a while he missed them – a lone foreigner in an alien village, and, of course, there was the barely suppressed resentment of the villagers over whom he had once held some kind of authority. His sense of loneliness and frustration became increasingly hard to deal with and in the end he started knocking Rebekah about when she didn't do exactly as he wanted. She avoided the others, but her bruises were the talk of the women at the well: "Well, she must've been asking for it."

In the end, she left him. It was really the only course of action open to her. She didn't want to – it wasn't right, and it left her on her own again. But she walked out and stayed with the only friend she had left, a woman who lived at the foot of Mount Gerizim. After a bit she heard that Cassius had disappeared – gone back to Gaul or somewhere, so the women at the well murmured to each other – and she came back to Sychar again. Soon the current man appeared: Amos. Rebekah had no-one who really cared. Amos certainly didn't care – all he wanted was his meals on time and a quick grope before his noisy and foetid sleep each night – but it was a fairly convenient arrangement: she got a bit of security and the basic necessities, and he got a relatively compliant bedfellow. It was the last straw for the women at the well, though.

So the day the Jew turned up was a day that burned in her memory as bright as the noon-day sun. There he was, sitting on the lip of the well, watching her intently as she approached. Just another selfish man wanting to take advantage of her, to add to the mess that was her life. A Jew who came up here where no-one knew him in order to get his illicit kicks.

"Any chance of a drink?" he said, shielding his eyes from the sun with a carpenter's calloused hand as he stared at her water jar.

*“But you’re a Jew,” she replied, as chastely as she could. “I can tell by your accent and the shape of your face. I’m a Samaritan – and a woman at that. What’s your game?” (“What’s **my** game?” she thought. “Out here alone by the well at noon.”)*

“You don’t know me ...” He paused. “And you don’t know real love, do you? Real, living, comforting love – love as true, as cool, as refreshing, as boundless as the water down there.” He looked away from her and down the well.

“I need that,” she said. “I need someone to care, to love, to be real.” Her voice quavered and her burning eyes swam with tears. “If you could show me that ...”

He spoke to her, this gentle Jewish carpenter. He spoke about her; he seemed to understand all that she’d been through, the rough times she’d lived, the stuff she’d had to put up with from men, from family, from neighbours, from erstwhile friends. He understood her suspicion and cynicism and knew that her five husbands and her present desperate search for someone who could really love her were not her fault. He didn’t condemn her, but talked of love and life – and it sounded like the things she’d heard about the Jewish Messiah, the one whom even her ancestors had longed for – God’s love wrapped up in human flesh.

He stared into her thoughts. “That’s me,” he said softly, after while. “That’s me,” he repeated more firmly, “the one you’re talking to. That’s me – the one you’re waiting for.” And Rebekah rushed away to tell the village, head held high, heart full – full of happiness and healing and hope.

“That’s me,” says Jesus. “That’s me – the one you’re waiting for.”]

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Over the past few weeks we’ve been looking at the stories of people who met Jesus when he was living in Palestine. Some of them have been expecting to meet Jesus – John The Baptist was really an announcer of Jesus’ coming; Nicodemus made an appointment to see him and the Rich Young Man wanted to ask him some questions. But others of them have been quite surprised to encounter Jesus. Zacchaeus, for example, was very surprised when Jesus called him down out of the tree where he had climbed to get a good look at him. And the woman we’re thinking about today was probably the most surprised of the lot.

Jesus and his friends were walking through her town one lunchtime and the disciples had gone off to try and find some food. Jesus was waiting for them by the well on the edge of the town and no-one else was about – they were having their lunch and it would have been very hot at that time of day. The only person who was out was a woman who’d come to get water – and that was rather unusual as most people got their water when it was cooler. Now it wasn’t really the done thing for a single man to talk to a lone woman, so that was a bit of a surprise. And Jesus was a Jew, whereas the woman was a Samaritan, which made them kind of enemies. So when Jesus started talking to her she was very surprised indeed (v9).

Anyway, despite the woman’s reticence, she gets involved in a conversation with Jesus. As they talk, it becomes obvious that Jesus knows quite a bit about her already – although they’ve never met before. And it also becomes clear that Jesus is actually interested in her, he cares about her. There’s quite a strong implication in the story that not many people do care about her, so this is something that she finds very comforting. And as he’s talking with her, he offers her something that will change her life. She doesn’t really understand it all – you can tell that from her questions and replies – but it gradually becomes clear that Jesus is actually wanting her to make a new start, to follow his ways and start getting the best out of life.

Eventually, Jesus makes it clear to her that he is the Messiah, the special person sent by God to help the world get back on track. And, naturally, this woman is overjoyed. So much so, in fact, that she leaves her big water jar and rushes off into the town to tell everyone about him and to bring them to meet him.

As we've said, this woman probably wasn't very popular in the town, so the difference in her must have been pretty dramatic to get all the others to come out and meet the man who had changed her. And as they do, John (who wrote this story) tells us that many more people decided to put their faith in him and had their own lives changed.

Now, as we've looked at these stories each week, we've tried to see ways in which they might have something to say to us today. After all, all these things were written in the Bible to have some kind of effect on those who read them later on. And I reckon there are plenty of people here this morning who are a bit like this woman in some way or other.

Some of you – many of you, perhaps – aren't really expecting to meet Jesus at all. You've come along here this morning for the umpteenth time – because you always do and it's what you do on Sunday mornings – but you don't actually expect to meet Jesus. Some of you may be here for the first time or on an occasional visit and, again, you're not here to meet Jesus: you're here to meet your friends or keep your mum happy or just have a look at what's going on – but you don't actually expect to meet Jesus. Well, this morning you may have met him – not in the flesh as it were, but something you've seen or heard or said or sung has suddenly struck you as important. Somehow, Jesus has been speaking to you. What are you going to do about it? How are you going to respond? You might not understand it all, but you're curious and you think there might be something in this Jesus stuff that can help you. Well, if you do want to know a bit more, ask me or one of the youth leaders or a friend whom you know is a Christian, and they might be able to help you discover a bit more.

It may be that you're just rather surprised that Jesus cares about you. The woman at the well was surprised to know that Jesus knew about her and wanted to speak to her and help her. Maybe you've never considered the fact that Jesus cares about you, that he loves you. This book, the Bible, from which we've read this story this morning, is full of stuff about how much God loves you. The overwhelming message of this book is that you matter to God. You matter to him so much, in fact, that Jesus came into this world and died for you, died to help you get back to being friends with God – not just for now, but forever. Jesus knows all about you – all the good things, all the bad things, all the attractive things, all the really annoying things – and he still loves you. Perhaps that's the surprise this morning. And you need to let that sink in, to let it affect your life.

It may be that you do know that. You have met Jesus. He has had an effect on your life already. And like the woman in the story you now need to let that be really obvious in your life. Jesus had such an effect on her that she rushed off to tell everyone else about it. Are you prepared to tell other people about Jesus? That's what these people who've been up here on the stage this morning have been pledging to do. And if you do tell people about Jesus, is it obvious from your life that something has happened, that you're different – and that it's a difference worth talking about? Loads of people came and listened to Jesus and had their lives changed because of this woman. Are you ready to tell other people about him so that their lives can be changed too?

Discussion notes on the next page.

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Like many of the people who encountered Jesus, this woman at the well in Sychar was surprised to meet him. She was a lone Samaritan woman – three reasons for not engaging in conversation with a man. But the conversation changed her life for the better as she discovered that

- Jesus knows all about her
- Jesus cares about her
- Jesus offers her a wonderful new start in her life

Having spoken to Jesus and experienced something of his love and compassion, the woman rushes off to tell others about him. There must have been something recognisably different about her for the other townspeople to follow her out to the well to meet Jesus so readily.

People today – even those of us who are regular churchgoers – rarely expect to meet Jesus. And when we do, it surprises us. Many people are also surprised to discover that Jesus loves them and cares about them.

Those who have had that encounter should be prepared to tell others and to live lives that are noticeably different. As we share the good news that Jesus loves us, others will be drawn to him and, in turn, have their lives transformed as well.

Questions for discussion

1. It's always assumed that this woman is an immoral person. Why? Is that fair?
2. Have you ever been surprised by Jesus? Do you ever expect to meet him? In what ways do we encounter Jesus?
3. Why do you think people are surprised to discover that Jesus loves them? What difference can that make?
4. How can we demonstrate lives that are attractively different? What should we (personally and collectively) be doing to draw other people to meet Jesus?
5. Jesus' conversation with the woman is fairly enigmatic – he talks about "*living water*" and "*worshipping in spirit and in truth*". To what extent should we try to put his sayings into more easily comprehensible words and phrases? Does that then "lose something in translation"?