

Sermon: Third Sunday In Lent

Theme: Overflowing Love

Text: John 4:5-42

⁵ So Jesus came to a town in Samaria called Sychar, near the plot of ground Jacob had given to his son Joseph. ⁶ Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired as he was from the journey, sat down by the well. It was about noon.

⁷ When a Samaritan woman came to draw water, Jesus said to her, 'Will you give me a drink?' ⁸ (His disciples had gone into the town to buy food.) ⁹ The Samaritan woman said to him, 'You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?' (For Jews do not associate with Samaritans.) ¹⁰ Jesus answered her, 'If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water.'

¹¹ 'Sir,' the woman said, 'you have nothing to draw with and the well is deep. Where can you get this living water?' ¹² Are you greater than our father Jacob, who gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did also his sons and his livestock?' ¹³ Jesus answered, 'Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, ¹⁴ but whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life.'

¹⁵ The woman said to him, 'Sir, give me this water so that I won't get thirsty and have to keep coming here to draw water.' ¹⁶ He told her, 'Go, call your husband and come back.' ¹⁷ 'I have no husband,' she replied. Jesus said to her, 'You are right when you say you have no husband. ¹⁸ The fact is, you have had five husbands, and the man you now have is not your husband. What you have just said is quite true.'

¹⁹ 'Sir,' the woman said, 'I can see that you are a prophet. ²⁰ Our ancestors worshipped on this mountain, but you Jews claim that the place where we must worship is in Jerusalem.' ²¹ 'Woman,' Jesus replied, 'believe me, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. ²² You Samaritans worship what you do not know; we worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews. ²³ Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshippers will worship the Father in the Spirit and in truth, for they are the kind of worshippers the Father seeks. ²⁴ God is spirit, and his worshippers must worship in the Spirit and in truth.'

²⁵ The woman said, 'I know that Messiah' (called Christ) 'is coming. When he comes, he will explain everything to us.' ²⁶ Then Jesus declared, 'I, the one speaking to you – I am he.'

²⁷ Just then his disciples returned and were surprised to find him talking with a woman. But no one asked, 'What do you want?' or 'Why are you talking with her?'

²⁸ Then, leaving her water jar, the woman went back to the town and said to the people, ²⁹ 'Come, see a man who told me everything I've ever done. Could this be the Messiah?' ³⁰ They came out of the town and made their way towards him. ³¹ Meanwhile his disciples urged him, 'Rabbi, eat something.' ³² But he said to them, 'I have food to eat that you know nothing about.' ³³ Then his disciples said to each other, 'Could someone have brought him food?' ³⁴ 'My food,' said Jesus, 'is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work. ³⁵ Don't you have a saying, "It's still four months until harvest"? I tell you, open your eyes and look at the fields! They are ripe for harvest. ³⁶ Even now the one who reaps draws a wage and harvests a crop for eternal life, so that the sower and the reaper may be glad together. ³⁷ Thus the saying "One sows and another reaps" is true. ³⁸ I sent you to reap what you have not worked for. Others have done the hard work, and you have reaped the benefits of their labour.'

³⁹ Many of the Samaritans from that town believed in him because of the woman’s testimony, ‘He told me everything I’ve ever done.’ ⁴⁰ So when the Samaritans came to him, they urged him to stay with them, and he stayed two days. ⁴¹ And because of his words many more became believers. ⁴² They said to the woman, ‘We no longer believe just because of what you said; now we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this man really is the Saviour of the world.’



We’ve had a couple of wet years, including a rainy start to autumn. But many of us will remember the millennium drought, years of persistent low rainfall from 1997 through to 2010. I was living in Melbourne over those years. The Garden State became a state of anxiety as rivers, ponds and lakes dried up, and gardens succumbed to heat stress. Water rationing was introduced as reservoirs dipped to their lowest ever level. What I found the most disheartening was that all of the city’s fountains were shut

down to save water. It was only a small thing, but it symbolised the shriveling up of joy, and hope.

Hope. It’s hard to face the future without it. At times it felt like the rain would never return. The Black Saturday fires, at the tail end of the drought, felt like the final nail in the coffin. But it did rain again. The gardens and pastures were replenished. People felt a renewed and palpable sense of joy in the natural environment.

Hope. Is there a drought of hope in your life and wider world? Globally the answer may well be yes. As far as our church goes, the weather in the world around us appears to be hot, dry and unpromising. It is easy to throw our arms up in despair and wonder if the God we are worshipping is living and active, and actively engaged in what we say and do.

Last week’s conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus pointed us to the confidence that we can have in the God who has given new birth through water and the Spirit. Today we are privy to another even more remarkable and life-changing conversation, the longest Jesus has with anyone in the gospels. It’s a conversation that should have never taken place on multiple grounds: a man should not talk to a woman to whom he was not related; a Jewish person should not talk to a Samaritan, and a teacher of God’s holiness should be talking with someone who has had five husbands, and is currently living with a man who is not her husband. Three strikes, and you’re most definitely not in.

We don’t know this woman’s name. Later Christians have called St Photina, which means “the luminous one.” We can presume that hers had not been an easy life. The fact that she seemed keen to avoid the scrutiny of her fellow townsfolk by coming to get water in the heat of the day points to someone who was on the outside. But this was to be the day that changed her life.

The first thing that strikes us is that Jesus was at a well in Samaria at all. Why take the road less travelled? The answer to this question is seen in the woman’s witness to the residents of her town, and their response.

The second thing that stands out is the fact that Jesus was tired after his journey and sought some respite from the heart. Here is Jesus is the Word made flesh, the Son of God, and a human being, subject, as we are to hunger and thirst, tiredness too.

The third thing to notice, right at the beginning, is that it's Jesus who opens the conversation. He doesn't make a grand theological statement, instead, he asks the woman: "Will you give me a drink?" Here is Jesus asking for the help of another person, the Lord of the universe expressing his need and asking another. He makes himself vulnerable. It's most un-God like.



Fourthly, this is not an easy conversation. It's mired in misunderstandings. The woman is

aware they shouldn't be talking at all. She is surprised that Jesus is asking her for a drink; he makes an enigmatic statement about living water. She talks about how the Patriarch Jacob dug this well for the locals. Jesus again talks about how those who drink the water that he gives will gush with eternal life. How can that be? Jesus hasn't even brought with him a bucket to draw from the well. Nothing good can come of this.

Then Jesus asks her a question about her husband. All of sudden things get deeply personal. Has Jesus overstepped yet another boundary? Jesus appears to know far more about her than she knows about him. She is on the money to call him a prophet. But it's what Jesus reveals about her that takes the conversation much deeper. This isn't about water. It's about what brings a meaningful life. Knowing and worshipping God is the source of true, unending life. And this life comes from the person standing in front of her. First she saw him as a thirsty man, then a Jew, then a prophet, and now. Jesus completes the sequence: **"I, the one speaking to you, am he."**

People living dried up lives, looking for meaning and hope, wrung out by pain and suffering, mired in the mud of guilt and shame, they need what Jesus is-making God real through what he says and does. The only way that we can know God is through Jesus. He is the the Way, the Truth and the Life. And the Holy Spirit, the living Water, reveals who Jesus truly is to us, and slakes our thirst, and transforms our lives.

That's what happened to the woman. She left her water jar right there and high tailed it back to her village. Once a recluse, now she is a witness to Jesus. The story of her conversation with Jesus comes bubbling out, overflowing with hope and conviction. Yet there's nothing remarkable about her testimony: **"Come, see a man who told me everything I've ever done. Could this be the Messiah?"**

"Come" - I want you to have what I'm having. But it doesn't come from me. Instead, **"see a man who told me everything I've ever done."** I'm assuming that people knew her history. She doesn't hide it, but implicit her invitation is an understanding that meeting Jesus has transformed her life. He knew me, yet he didn't condemn me. His blazing love saw through me and loved me nonetheless. **"Could this be the Messiah?"** Get over your preconceptions, your dislike of the Jews and their religion and temple, and give this man a try.

Her witness worked wonders. The Samaritans did what she suggested; they went to Jesus and invited him to dwell with them, for two days. Note what John says, **"Because of his words many more became believers."**

There's so much we can take from his story. It reveals that God's love isn't limited to the physical borders of Israel. God is no respecter of roadblocks that even his own people have placed in his way. Jesus has time to ask for help, to listen and to lead others to the knowledge of the truth of his Father's love. What he knows about us he doesn't use to destroy us, but rather to open us up to receive his grace and mercy.

And then, how grace changes the course of a life. All of a sudden, this woman is overflowing with the love that sweeps others into the river of God's love. She tells her story simply and convincingly, not to draw attention to herself, but to Jesus. And then the Spirit, the Living Water that has refreshed her, directs others to an encounter with Jesus. People hear his words, and through them the Spirit creates faith that **"this man really is the Saviour of the world."**

We are living in a time of spiritual drought. We base this judgement on the evidence of a diminishing number of Christians in Australia, not much more than 40% of the population. Many people appear to be hardened against the church and its claims. Numbers in churches on a Sunday are in decline everywhere. What kind of future can we hope for?

It takes water to soften the hard crust of dry ground. One watering won't do it. We need to be persistent. Sometimes holes poked in the soil allow the water to soften the ground. Jesus knew the Samaritan women's need, her pain, and he opened this up so that the living water could soften her heart and allow him to speak the truth of God's love to her.

The way she told her story encourages me. It wasn't profound. It wasn't long. It was pointing to Jesus and how this chance encounter with him changed her future and gave her hope, hope that she wanted her fellow villagers to have. Even the fact that she would speak with those who had shunned her was in itself a miracle. And then she simply directed them to Jesus. Check him out!

As this was happening, Jesus was debriefing with the disciples. **"Don't you have a saying, 'It's still four months until harvest'? I tell you, open your eyes and look at the fields! They are ripe for harvest. Even now the one who reaps draws a wage and harvests a crop for eternal life, so that the sower and the reaper may be glad together."**

Today Jesus gives up hope for his church. There is always a harvest because the Spirit is always sowing seeds of faith. We who have been born from above have a story to tell. It doesn't have to be spectacular or polished. It's our story of the God who is at work in our lives, in whom we trust. The Holy Spirit takes our words and actions, and those of many others, and reaches into the dark corners and painful places in people's lives, and sows hope and a future.

The other thing we need to hear is Jesus' promise: **"the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life."** God, fill us again with this living water, your Holy Spirit. Enliven our spirits, fill our hearts with hope, open our eyes to see the harvest all around us. And let our love overflow into the lives of others. Amen.

Peace in Christ

Pastor Andrew Brook

