



See Well; View Kindly

The woman at the well!

John's gospel is a work of art and John, who wrote it, an artist. Every story is told with evocative symbols, layers of meaning, with little details that really get you into the scene. John's gospel is different from the others; less basic, more elaborate: Jesus is a little less the rabble-rouser rebel of Mark's gospel, and more the mystical, poetic, elusive teacher.

And in John's gospel, conversation is revolutionary. Conversation changes people's lives, conversation sets people on a different path. Last week it was the religious elite leader Nicodemus. Today it's a woman, from the despised ethnic group called Samaritans. Conversation changes everything.

For the meaning of this story to be given all its layers, it's important for us to note right at the beginning that this woman is not someone Jesus should be seen with. Jews and Samaritans hate each other. They "do not share vessels in common", they keep out of each other's way. It's not so much 'live and let live' as stay out of each other's way; Samaritans are untouchable.

Jesus meets this woman at what is called Jacob's well. This is the very well where Jacob met the love of his life, Rachel. Rachel was taking her sheep to find water – she was a shepherd. So, the well (and this well in particular) is steeped in Hebrew meaning and history; it's a place of meeting, of conversation, of community. And of love.

Although it's not in the gospels, the Orthodox tradition holds that Mary was at the well when the angel Gabriel came to visit her and so a well is symbolically also a place of announcements, a place of new promises, a place of holy encounter. It's not a temple or a church; it's a place of work, a place of daily chores, a place where women gather. And it's there that God is especially present in Scripture. If you work in an office or a school, talking at a well is like the conversations by the water cooler or in the staff kitchen; gossip, catching up, ordinary chat.

A well is not anything that we are familiar with today. We are, as in so many aspects of urban life, totally disconnected from the source of our water. As Londoners, we know that the water we drink from the tap is excellent but, in its excellence, has also been through I don't know how many other people before. We argue about putting fluoride in it. We fend off waiters trying to get us to have bottles of water with our meal, but we might look at the River Thames or the River Lea or we might remember the countless underground rivers that flow under our city, like the Walbrook or the Fleet. However, we don't go at evening to draw it from the earth; we don't often feel its natural abundance; and we've taught ourselves to think that we probably shouldn't go out in the rain.

We are out of touch with the water we need to survive, physically and often spiritually too. You might say that many of us lead lives that, in more ways than one, are slightly dehydrated.

Jesus, the itinerant healer and preacher, is travelling home, back up north to Galilee, because the Pharisee group were becoming critical of him down south. And this woman is curiously drawing water in the middle of the day (the hottest part of the day) possibly indicating that she was ostracised even from her own community, made to do her chores alone, not with the other women in the evening.

John's story telling is wonderful; right at the beginning Jesus doesn't just decorously perch himself on a wall; John shows us by the Greek words he uses that Jesus is really, really tired. In the Greek, the sense is that he flings himself down on the side of the well, just too tired to go with the others to get food. I'll wait here he says; he just can't take another step. We're not very used to seeing this kind of Jesus. We often think of him as having some kind of supernatural, or at least superhuman energy, marching about with his group, touching people wherever he goes, saying remarkable things, transforming situations. That will come but for now, he's thrown himself down, sitting by the well and the last thing his disciples see, as they head off to see if they can get some food, is him resting there.

The woman approaches with her jar. And he just says the thing that is presumably uppermost in his mind as the sun is high and he's been walking a long time. Give me a drink. And we're off into a conversation full of

challenge, fun, misunderstanding; not an easy conversation but one that brings change and healing and truth.

I've heard lots of sermons told from Jesus's point of view, highlighting the risks he is taking by speaking publicly with a woman from the hated Samaria. And he is clearly breaking a taboo by talking to her. Told from the woman's point of view, I think it has a slightly different energy; she's fun, not afraid to tease and challenge. Told from her point of view, she meets someone who tells her everything she ever did; and this truth-telling sets her free to be braver than she ever thought she could be.

'Give you a drink?' she says. 'You, a Jewish man, asking me a Samaritan woman for a drink, are you out of your mind? You can't do that.' Jesus is a little taken aback, 'Oh well, you know, all I wanted was a drink.'

I like to think that he kind of gets himself together a bit and remembers that he's got stuff to say, stuff to teach so he retreats into sermon mode. 'Okay then, right, well, if you knew who it was asking you for a drink, you'd actually be asking him, not the other way round, and the water he would give you would be living water.'

The woman roars with laughter. 'OMG...well...I don't know where you think you're going to get that water? You haven't got a bucket. What are you going to do?' You can almost see her turning to comment to the camera... 'There you go. I knew he'd never done a day's work in his life. Not a clue!'

Jesus tries again with his teaching. 'Well. Um. Everyone who drinks water from the well here will obviously get thirsty again eventually but actually I'm talking about water that stops you being thirsty at all.'

'Fantastic,' guffaws the woman, whose life revolves around the daily trudge of getting and carrying heavy, heavy water backwards and forwards. 'Fantastic...so I won't have to do that again? Different life? Let's have that water! Honestly, you couldn't make it up!'

I like to think of Jesus, who we remember, started this conversation pretty exhausted, and just wanting a simple drink of water in the heat of the day, now getting a bit near the end of his tether. *Go and call your husband*, he says. And, in brackets, *maybe I can get more sense out of him. You're clearly not taking me seriously. And, by the way, I still haven't had a drink.*

'Well,' says the woman, perhaps a little defiantly, and being a little economical with the truth, 'I don't have one, so I can't.'

'Yes, you're right,' says Jesus, 'and I know that not only that, but you have had five, and the one you're living with now isn't your husband.'

And then the conversation starts to be of a different order. I see the next bit of the conversation that Jesus says, something that propels both of them to talk on a different level.

Jesus says to her, 'What you have said is true.' What you have said is true. There is no explanation or comment on her personal circumstances, although anyone hearing the story might disapprove of her in some way. Jesus simply says, 'What you have said is true.' This truth telling about her life sets them off on a different path. After that, they discuss God and this woman is set alight by the conversation to such an extent that she becomes an evangelist. She is energised, articulate, generous. 'Come and see someone who told me everything I ever did.' No one is tired any more.

She is known, she is recognised, her story is told, as it is unvarnished, without any hubris or embellishment (with all its mixture of shame and fun, hope and playfulness, loneliness, hard work, family complexities, complicated sexual identity). She says to her friends, 'Come and see someone who told me everything I ever did.' Word of mouth. 'He's not what you think. Honestly, come and see.'

This clear sightedness of the woman, and the truth telling of Jesus is something expressed in the art work SEA WELL which is in our side chapel today for a week. It is in the words of the artist, Sara Mark, who is a member of St James's congregation and community here – *an exhortation to clear sightedness, holding in balance the metaphors of fresh life-giving water and healing salt water*. They are in glass chemical reagent bottles to suggest that they might be active substances in a process of transformation. This is a piece that Sara imagined when she was walking the Camino...the pilgrim's route...the Way of St James, through Northern Spain last summer. And she went to Finisterre, the end of the earth, to find this water.

The title SEA WELL (note the spelling) is a playful way to express the meaning of the gospel today, words are amplified by water itself. The gospel (good news) is amplified by both the water in the well where Jesus met his match and the living water he wanted to speak of that can irrigate a dehydrated life; living water as a way of talking about a spiritual awakesness, awareness, drenched in life, drenched in grace.

I recognise this woman and sometimes I can hear her voice in conversations I have today. Practical people trying to hold down a job, deal with a teenager or two. Fighting their fears, their worries, hoping they're doing enough to get by.

It's easy for people to say, when faced with the prospect of religious belief or conversations about God, as this woman does, you're so heavenly minded you're of no earthly use. Honestly, you're speaking in riddles. Stop it! Talk straight! Call a spade a spade. It's all very well for you in all your religious get-up with your religious jargon, but I'm trying to live in the real world; I'm worried about my daughter. I'm still paying off a loan. I've forgotten what it's like to go on a date. I'm getting by.

I heard this woman in a conversation I had this week with a woman who said it took her two years to be able to say in conversation "My husband's in prison". And even now that he's out, she searches the face of the person she says it to, hunting for their reaction, for their revulsion, for their rejection.

If being a Samaritan means being ostracised and isolated, then our job as a Christian community is to transgress that isolation, and challenge that taboo. Yesterday here at this church I was thinking about this experience of being shunned, turned away from – in two ways. We hosted our breakfast, which we have here on Saturday mornings for people with no recourse to public funds. These are people seeking asylum, whose claims have been initially rejected, who are working on an appeal. As I was standing outside welcoming guests from Nigeria, Ghana, Iraq, Iran, I was in a long conversation with a British guy, who thought that it was disgusting that we were inviting this particular group into the church, and not, on this occasion, including British people. It is a tough call on some levels but he, himself homeless, was hostile to the very thought of this group being welcomed into what he kept saying was a Church of England (with the emphasis on the England) church.

And later in the day, we hosted a service for an organisation called FACT. It is an organisation for, as the letters stand for, falsely accused carers and teachers. In the proper and necessary uncovering of the catastrophic consequences of abuse for survivors, there is a small group of people who have been caught in the crossfire of false accusation; and for the first time in their twenty-year history, they came to church yesterday. It occurred to me, from their own stories afterwards, that they themselves experience the kind of ostracisation that comes with what one of them called the thoroughly human but also toxic phrase, 'there's no smoke without fire.'

For those who are living through the consequences of having been abused, I have heard many stories of terrible shame and taboo. It occurred to me that for this group yesterday, unjustly accused, they too endure appalling isolation and that the church must be a place where their stories can be told too.

From this gospel, we're asked to seek out the taboos of our own society and break them. We're asked to have conversations in the light (when the sun is high) at noon and not allow them to be held in the dark. We're asked to contemplate tenderly (as Jesus does for the woman) the shame that we carry, and know that it is known, acknowledged, held by God. And we're asked to believe that even when the shame is venomous, sulphurous, silencing, there is always in conversation with God, the possibility of transformation and peace.

Thank God for this gospel; may we pray for the women and men whose stories are not yet heard. And offer to God those parts of ourselves that we yearn to be healed, that we yearn to see well.