

Last week, we were introduced to Nicodemus who comes to Jesus by night and lasts all of nine verses in his conversation with Jesus before fading into the night from whence he came. This week another character's encounter with Jesus, the Samaritan woman at the well, is told. The contrast between Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman is striking. Given the fact that they appear one right after the other in the Gospel, we are meant to notice this contrast in all of its detail.

Nicodemus is a Pharisee, an insider, a leader of the Jews. He is a man, he has a name, but he comes to Jesus by night.

The character to whom we are introduced in this week's text is a Samaritan, a religious and political outsider. She is a woman, she has no name, but she meets Jesus at noon, in full daylight. The contrast between their conversations is even more extraordinary. Nicodemus is unable to move beyond the confines of his religious system, the Samaritan moves outside of her religious expectations and engages Jesus in theological debate. While Nicodemus's last questioning words to Jesus expose his disbelief, "How can this be?" the last words of the woman at the well, also posed as a question, "He cannot be the Christ, can he?" lead her to witness to her whole town.

The more major differences between Nicodemus and the woman at the well frequently directs the preaching today's gospel toward reducing Jesus' meeting with the Samaritan woman to that which exemplifies Jesus for the outsiders. "See, Jesus did not come for the important people of the world, like Nicodemus, but for the no-names, the down-trodden," and, as some older commentaries misinterpreted the Samaritan woman, "the five-time losers."

But then we have to wonder, could this meeting at the well really be about us, for us? If we are honest, do we truly think of ourselves as outsiders? Are we really the marginalized of society, those who are easily cast aside, those about whom others might say, "why is he talking to her?" Perhaps the extraordinary message in this reading is not simply that Jesus is for her, but that she becomes a witness for him?

The conversation is on two levels. Jesus is humanly vulnerable. It is noon, the hottest time of the day and Jesus is in need of water. How often have we not

accepted help from someone because we feel we do not wish to be beholden to them?

The Samaritan woman, whose name we do not know probably because she was a woman and also a Samaritan, has access to water which he needs for his physical life. On the other hand, Jesus can offer her the spiritual drink of eternal life.

The woman misunderstands, and why shouldn't she? Jesus was talking on a spiritual plain whilst she remains earth firmly in this world and not the next. All she sees is a weary Jewish traveller who needs rehydrating.

“The Samaritan woman said to him, “How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?” (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.)^[a] ¹⁰ Jesus answered her, “If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, ‘Give me a drink,’ you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water.”

What a relief it would be to not to come in the heat of the day to draw water! Jesus speaks of a fresh, running water. Living water is the perfect metaphor for eternal life, constantly renewed.

“Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? ¹² Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?” ¹³ Jesus said to her, “Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, ¹⁴ 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.” ¹⁵ The woman said to him, “Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water.”

Jesus cuts through the woman's preoccupation with herself to the crucial point of her vulnerability.

“¹⁶ Jesus said to her, “Go, call your husband, and come back.” ¹⁷ The woman answered him, “I have no husband.” Jesus said to her, “You are right in saying, ‘I have no husband’; ¹⁸ for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!”

Startled by his knowledge of her life, she assumes that he has the clairvoyance of the traditional prophet. She then uses the oldest trick in the book to get out of a potentially tricky situation by employing that well known strategy- distraction. She attempts to engage Jesus in a discussion on the issues that divide Jews and Samaritans;

“Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem.”

Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem.

You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews.

But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth."

But Jesus is having none of this and cuts straight to the quick, as it were;

“The woman said to him, "I know that Messiah is coming" (who is called Christ).”When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us."

Jesus said to her, "I am he, the one who is speaking to you."

And so the climax of the conversation is reached as Jesus openly reveals his identity to her, with very dramatic consequences.

The Samaritan woman abandons her water jug and goes, in a state of some excitement to share her tentative, new found faith with others.

The Samaritans listen both to her testimony and to Jesus’ words and some believe. The disciples are challenged about their priorities for future mission;

“Just then his disciples came. They were astonished that he was speaking with a woman, but no one said, "What do you want?" or, "Why are you speaking with her?"

Then the woman left her water jars and went back to the city. She said to the people,

"Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?"

They left the city and were on their way to him.”

This is the challenge of life and faith. We never know when we might run into someone like the Samaritan woman as we go about our lives. As Jeff Astley, an Anglican priest and Hon. Professor at Durham has written;

“In John’s Gospel, Jesus accepts the title of Messiah first from the lips of a Samaritan woman. For her, Jesus is initially ‘a Jew’ and then ‘a prophet’, but she later becomes the catalyst of the much greater confession of Jesus as ‘the Saviour of the world’.

Now, however, it is the disciples’ turn to miss the point of Jesus’ metaphorical theology, this time over the symbol of food. After our need for water, food is the next greatest necessity of life. Still operating in one dimension, the disciples fret that their master is not eating enough. His response is to another, higher dimension of life and nourishment but they are still finding it difficult to raise their sights above the mundane concerns of living... God’s food, like God’s drink, is the gift that keeps on giving and will endure. It is present now and will outlast everything that can give us life.”

Hopefully this prayer will help to put it into some perspective.

God of wilderness and water,
your Son was baptized and tempted as we are.
Guide us through this season,
that we may not avoid struggle,
but open ourselves to blessing,
through the cleansing depths of repentance
and the heaven-rending words of the Spirit.

Amen.