

Sermon for Sunday 12th March – *Woman at the Well*

I would like to begin by telling you a story ...

“A couple of years ago I attended a prayer meeting which was held in a sacristy at the back of a Catholic church. The small room was clearly used as a storage space for a lot of the paraphernalia commonly used by churches during the course of a year and it was consequently somewhat cluttered. Midway through the meeting I found my attention deflected from prayer by the label on the lid of a large plastic tub beside my chair. The label describing the tub’s contents said, in very large lettering, “CRIB FIGURES FOR INSIDE CHURCH: BLESSED VIRGIN MARY, ST JOSEPH, 2 X INFANT JESUS (DIFFERENT SIZES)”. Once my amusement subsided, it struck me that the description of Jesus coming in more than one size actually provided an apt metaphor for faith development. At some stage in our lives many of us who have had the privilege of following Jesus for some time will discover that the Jesus (or God) we thought we knew is, as the Christian author JB Phillips put it, “too small.”¹ What we once believed about God no longer seems sufficient to accommodate all we have come to understand through greater life experience.”

I don't know if you can identify with that story – I hope it provides you with some food for thought – but today I would like to focus on the crash course the Samaritan woman at the well had in revising her perception of Jesus. During and after her conversation with him **four different descriptors** of Jesus are used, each of which shows a broadening/deepening understanding of who he might be. We're left in some doubt at the end of the passage about what the woman herself concluded about Jesus – a point I will come back to later – but let's begin by looking at each of the four statements about Jesus we are presented with in this passage.

1. “You are a Jew – and I am a Samaritan” (verse 9)

You are a man with whom I should not be speaking! A number of things should have prevented this conversation from taking place at all. There was a prejudice against women – Jewish teachers warned against speaking to a woman in public. One writer even said, ‘Let no one talk with a woman in the street, no, not with his own wife.’ Then there were racial tensions between the Jews and Samaritans – tensions which are a bit lost on us today, as, thanks to Jesus’ famous parable about the Samaritan who stopped to help an injured stranger, we are most likely to associate the word “Samaritan” with the word “good”. The Samaritans were regarded by Jews as inferior. They had descended from ancient Israelite tribes but they had intermarried with people of other races. There was also a religious problem, which is referred to in today's reading – the Samaritans refused to worship in the Jerusalem temple, which the Jews believed was essential to true worship of God. Added to this there was a

¹ JB Phillips, *Your God is Too Small* (London: Epworth Press, 1952).

political tension. Two hundred years earlier, the Samaritans had aided the Syrians in a war against the Jews.

So the Samaritan woman's initial identification of Jesus as "a Jew" doesn't seem a very promising start to their interaction. It certainly doesn't seem likely from this starting point that this woman would become known as one of the first evangelists!

2. "I see you are a prophet" (verse 19)

As Jesus speaks to the woman at the well, he reveals that he knows about her circumstances. She has been married to five men and the man she is now living with is not really her husband. These facts are often interpreted as pointing to her having lived a rather unorthodox lifestyle, though one commentary I read this week argued that to have five marriages in this time period was not necessarily that unusual.

"Widowhood was a common experience in a culture where women were married very young. Divorce in order to gain a more socially advantageous marriage was also not uncommon, though it is unclear if the Samaritans allowed women to apply for it without a male guardian, as the Romans may have. So it seems likely that her many marriages were not a result of her choice."

The fact that the woman is now living with a man who is "not really her husband" could be the result of several possible scenarios (which I don't want to take the time to go into now) but we might note that Jesus doesn't condemn her status but simply acknowledges "what you have said is true" (verse 18) as he continues to talk with her.

So, she says, "I see you are a prophet". Not *"the prophet"* but one among other revered wise and holy figures. Perhaps in an effort to deflect him from talking any more about her, the woman decides that an appropriate topic to raise with a prophet is the well-worn question as to where one should worship God. She says, "My Samaritan ancestors worshipped God on this mountain, but you Jews say that Jerusalem is the place where we should worship God." Jesus' answer is startling – he dismisses both places of worship as being of particular importance: "The time will come when people will not worship the Father either on this mountain or in Jerusalem ... But the time is coming and is already here, when by the power of God's Spirit people will worship the Father as he really is, offering him the true worship that he wants. God is Spirit, and only by the power of his Spirit can people will worship him as he really is."

Again, Jesus encourages the woman (and us) not to be confined by her expectations and understanding of religious matters but to be open to the work of the Holy Spirit – that living water he is offering her.

So she says, "I know that the Messiah will come, and when he comes, he will tell us everything. And to this outsider, this sceptical Samaritan woman, Jesus says, "I am he, I who am talking with you." What does she make of this claim?

3. “Could he be the Messiah?” (verse 29)

The woman does not simply accept what Jesus says. Rather, she rushes off, without her water jar, to share with others the *possibility* that this might be the Messiah. She says to the people of the town, “Come and see the man who told me everything I have ever done. Could he be the Messiah?” So they left the town and went out to see Jesus for themselves.

In the woman’s defence, Jesus did not look like the Messiah the people of Israel had been expecting. We know that even Jesus’ closest disciples did not really understand what the Messiah would do – Jesus had to correct their assumptions. They seem to have believed that Jesus would assume political authority and power, but Jesus words about his role as Messiah were the opposite of what they expected. He said, “the Son of man must suffer many things and be rejected but elders, chief priests and teachers of the law. He must be killed and on the third day raised to life.” This was bewildering for the disciples. And clearly the woman at the well needed time to process that big question: “Could he be the Messiah?”

Jane Williams writes: “We know that through the woman’s agency, many people come to faith in Christ, but we are not told if she did. We presumably like to think that if we were faced, as she was with Jesus in person, declaring, ‘I am the Messiah’, we would not hesitate for an instant. We would not dither or postpone or offer Jesus a lukewarm reception. But there are an awful lot of warning stories in the Bible that suggest that dithering is one of the things we are best at.”

4. “He really is the Saviour of the world” (verse 41)

The last description of Jesus in today’s reading comes from those who did come to believe that Jesus was not only the anticipated Messiah – the deliverer of Israel – but the “Saviour of the world”. It is interesting, and perhaps a little challenging for those of us who have been part of the established church for many years, that this bigger and broader understanding of the Messiah and his mission came from “outsiders” – from all the Samaritans who came to Jesus, listened to his teaching, and begged him to stay with them. Jesus stayed with them for two more days, and we are told, “Many more believed because of his message, and they said to the woman, ‘We believe now, not because of what you said, but because we ourselves have heard him, and we know that he really is the Saviour of the world.’”

In some ways, these words seem a bit dismissive of the woman who had shared her experience of Jesus with them. But these verses do remind us that, in the end, each of us is invited to respond to God *personally*.

The verses we have focused on in today's reading remind me of Peter's famous declaration, in Matthew 16, that Jesus is the Messiah:

Peter Says Jesus Is the Christ

¹³ Jesus came into the country of Caesarea Philippi. He asked His followers, "Who do people say that I, the Son of Man, am?" ¹⁴ They said, "Some say You are John the Baptist and some say Elijah and others say Jeremiah or one of the early preachers."

¹⁵ He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" ¹⁶ Simon Peter said, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."

¹⁷ Jesus said to him, "Simon, son of Jonah, you are happy because you did not learn this from man. My Father in heaven has shown you this."

We know from the rest of Peter's story, though, that even Peter's understanding of what the Messiah would do and be was limited. Through the guidance of the Holy Spirit his understanding deepened and broadened – there is a lovely account in the book of Acts of a vision he was given which helped him to understand that the gospel was not just for the Jews but for the Gentiles too.

Today, we might ask the Holy Spirit to help each of us to continue to grow in faith and understanding of Christ.