

This is the wonderful story of a woman who comes to faith in the most unusual circumstances. It's a wonderful story because it shows the essence of compassion in a situation which could have been quite judgemental.

Jesus is on a journey from Judea to Galilee and He chooses to go through Samaria, a territory which has a hostile relationship with the Jews. There had been hatred between the Jews and the Samaritans for generations; the Jews believed that the Temple Mount was in Jerusalem and the Samaritans believed that Mount Gerazim was the place of God's choice for the Temple. The dispute mounted until it became mutual hatred, one for the other. It reminds me of the story of two neighbouring villages in the south of England which didn't speak to each other because three hundred years earlier one of the villages didn't tell the other that the Danes were coming!

Jesus might well have chosen deliberately to travel via Samaria simply to bridge the issue between the Jews and Samaritans. In any event, he has travelled along with some disciples and has become quite thirsty. He sees a woman drawing water from a well and asks her for a drink. This is where the effect of the mutual hatred of the two races sets in: not only were Jews never to speak to Samaritans, Jewish men were never to speak to a woman.

Jesus breaks both rules. His concern is not to maintain the status quo, but to bridge the divide with compassion. It just happens to occur at a well.

Wells were important in the Hebrew Testament. Abraham's servant meets his master's future daughter-in-law at a well; Jacob meets his wife, Rachel, at a well—at noon; Moses meets his wife, Zipporah, at a well.

The Samaritan woman is shocked that a Jewish man would initiate a conversation with her. She has come at noon, the hottest part of the day, to draw water. Jesus says, "Give me a drink". Here is the man with Living Water thirsting for a drink. He has no bucket; the woman has the upper hand as she can draw the water. She gives Him a drink and Jesus begins a conversation with her. The conversation deepens and we see the Samaritan woman growing in her understanding of who Jesus is as the story progresses.

Jesus offers her the Living Water which He alone can give and the woman responds immediately, saying, "Sir, give me this water so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water." Jesus, knowing that the woman is keen to know more, suggests that she call her husband.

The interaction now becomes embarrassing. We hear no more about the water, but Jesus outlines the marital

history of this woman. She replies that she has no husband and Jesus comments that she has had five husbands and the one she has now is not her husband. The woman responds that she believes Jesus is a prophet.

There's some discussion about the place of worship—Samaritans believe it was on the mountain where they are talking but the woman comments that Jesus says the place of worship is in Jerusalem. Jesus then overcomes his own Jewish cultic tradition by affirming that God is best worshipped in spirit and in truth. Thus, he does away with the temple institution both in Israel and in Samaria and points to a different reality, which he believes to be God's ultimate desire.

The woman has come from "Sir" at the well, to understand that Jesus is a prophet, ultimately to comment that she knows the Messiah is coming. This is her gradual growth in understanding. Jesus responds to her comment with the words, "I am he, the One who is speaking to you."

At this point the whole situation changes. The disciples return and are astonished that Jesus is speaking with a woman—and a Samaritan, as well. They're so astonished that they say nothing.

The woman leaves her water-jar at the well and returns to the city. This can be seen as the moment when the

woman's whole perspective has shifted. She came at noon to draw water from the well and suddenly the water is no longer important. Leaving the water-jar behind shows that her life has been changed from one where she has to keep coming to the same well over and over again to one where she has found an endless wellspring of life.

There is a comparison here also to the patriarch Jacob, represented by the great well to which the woman has come, with Jesus representing the greater well of the Spirit. This accords with Jesus' statement that, "a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem." In leaving behind the water-jar to testify that Jesus is the Christ, St John is showing that the Samaritan woman has left behind the old way of worship to pursue a new worship that is by the Spirit.

The woman says to the people in the city, "Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?" Her realisation about this man has now gone from knowing that the Messiah is coming to the Messiah himself. The people of the city are on their way to meet Jesus.

The disciples then urge Jesus to eat something. They represent those people inside the community who are not very enthusiastic about including non-Jews as fellow believers. The male disciples are summoned to participate in the mission but they must acknowledge that "others"

have laboured first. This is a veiled reference to the missionary work of the Samaritan woman. Ironically, it's the Samaritan villagers who recognise Jesus as the Messiah and proclaim Him Saviour of the world, while the disciples can only urge Jesus to eat.

Last week, we heard that Nicodemus came to Jesus at night to enquire about the kingdom. Unlike Nicodemus, who does not seem to move beyond his confusion, the Samaritan woman does move. She asks for this Living Water, realizing that it is not ordinary water but not yet understanding in what way, and she will go still further with and for Jesus as the narrative develops.

Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman are opposites in many ways: they embody gender, class, and status, and ethnic and religious differences. The setup for each encounter also differs: Nicodemus initiates the conversation with Jesus, while Jesus initiates the conversation with the Samaritan woman. The former is at night while the latter is at noon. It's interesting that Nicodemus' confusion takes place in the dark, whereas the Samaritan woman's progressive realisation takes place in daylight.

Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman indicate how others will receive Jesus in the Gospel. Whether Jew or Samaritan, some will be curious but cautious, while others will be curious and will invite others into their curiosity.

The common element, though, is Jesus' hospitality, revealing himself to all who seek him.

A vital aspect of this great story is that there is no mention of sin or sinfulness in this text and no word of judgment or even encouragement for the woman to change her life. What is life-changing for the woman is, according to her, that Jesus has known her entirely, and this being known has enabled her to know Jesus.

In the name of the + Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**