

**SERMON FOR THE DIOCESE OF BUNBURY: GEOFF CHADWICK: LENT 3:  
JN 4:5-42: “LIVING WATER IS OFTEN FOUND IN THOSE WHO BREAK THE  
NORMS OF OUR SOCIETY”**

As we travel our journey through the wilderness of Lent, we come to a dry spell. We meet Jesus sitting at Jacob’s well in the middle of the day. No doubt the weather was hot, and he was hot, having travelled on foot from Judea. To be hot and thirsty in the middle of the day is nothing unusual but to meet a woman intending to draw water from a well in the middle of the day is unusual. Women normally collected water in the morning – it was against social custom to go out in the heat of noon. So, for Jesus, the sight of a woman wanting to draw water at the wrong time of the day was enough to tell him that she was an outcast in her village. Normally the women would have come as a group – this woman comes alone. The fact that she had had five husbands was probably the cause of her social isolation. No doubt she had been somewhat of a loose woman.

There is another problem with this encounter. Jesus is a Jew and she is a Samaritan. To quote verse nine in the passage ““How is it that you, a Jew ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?”” (Jews do not share things with Samaritans.) (Jn 4:9, NRSV). These two races did not get on because they had slightly different views on how God should be worshipped. The Jews worshipping God on Mt Zion in Jerusalem and the Samaritans having a separate mountain. Each claimed to be the true worshippers of YHWH at the exclusion of the other. So here is Jesus talking to an enemy.

There’s yet another problem. The woman is talking to a man in public. This was against the social norm of the day where women could only speak to woman in public,

and could only talk to their husbands in private. (It is difficult to ascertain how strictly this code was adhered to but nevertheless Jesus and the woman are breaking a social norm. Even more surprising is that the woman is talking theology –this was a topic reserved for men only!)

This passage in its original context is radical. It speaks of a Jesus who breaks a number of highly respected social norms in the name of offering “Living Water” to a needy woman. This woman, articulate yet outcast, frightened yet courageous, devout yet Samaritan – is transformed by a rule breaker. The Jesus who talks to an enemy, who talks to an outcast, who dares to probe the sinfulness of the woman’s life – brings living water.

Living water in this instance at least, comes through the breaking of social norms. Social norms can be helpful in society. They place limits on unruly behaviour and they generate expectations which enable the smooth running of society. Even so, social norms can be debilitating. In the case with the woman at the well, all the norms about the differences between Samaritans and Jews, and the expectations of the roles of women in society were debilitating. Not just for her but for society in general. Fortunately, after 2000 years, “Living Water” has transformed many of those debilitations. For example, women can now talk to men in public. Even so, many things still remain the same. Modern day “Jews” and “Samaritans” still slug it out over religion. One only has to see the religious intolerance and associated rioting in various parts of the world to be reminded of this fact. Women who have had “five husbands” who aren’t really their husbands are still cast out as “loose women.”

There are other social norms which debilitate us. Expectations which stem the flow of living waters. Rules norms which parch our nourishment. Misplaced values,

which leave us seeking for water in the middle of the day, alone, and without the support of community.

What could some of those norms be?

I offer a few of my suggestions.

- 1) The Tall Poppy Syndrome: Outside observers (and internal ones as well) speak of the Australian propensity to criticise those who do well. We love the quiet achiever, and that's fine, yet we attack those with vision and drive. Could we break this social norm and allow the living waters of fine achievement quench the thirst of a nation staggering under mediocrity?
- 2) Economic Rationalism. This is the belief that all things valuable are measured in dollar terms. Tell that to the worker who is made to work longer and longer hours such that he become a stranger to his own family. Tell that to the people on hospital waiting lists who know that the Operating Theatres close down over Christmas to save money. Could the living waters of the social value of life sweep away the false notion of the value of riches?
- 3) Macho Men and Mushie women. "Men don't cry and women don't assert themselves." How sad it is that so many men and women in our society are parched by the expectations what a real man and a real woman are meant to be. Real mean and

real women are those who allow the living waters of free expression to flow in their lives. Yes, men can cry, and yes, women can assert themselves.

Jesus said: “The water I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life” (Jn 4: 13, NRSV). This living water came to the woman at the well through the breaking of certain debilitating social norms. Would we have the courage to do the same? To discard the social norms which stop the gushing of God’s living water with in us? Well, maybe...

The Lord be with you.

**And also with you.**