

Lent 3 John 4:5-42

Today's readings all point to the life giving nature of water, and living through the long, hot Australian summer, we are all well aware of the vital nature of water for survival. But the most fascinating of the readings has to be the gospel encounter at the well, a source of water, with the most remarkable woman.

The story is commonly known as Jesus and the Samaritan woman or the woman at the well. It is a story of one of the many, though often overlooked, strong and even confrontational women in the bible.

We are told that Jesus had to travel through Samaria, well he didn't really have to travel through Samaria, no other Jew worth their name would have done so. Travelling through Samaria was the quickest route from where Jesus had been to where he was going but Jews simply didn't enter Samaria, not even if they were in a rush. Perhaps what the gospel writer means is that for fulfilment of God's will Jesus had to pass through Samaria, certainly he had a profound effect on the people in doing so.

So Jesus chose to do something out of the ordinary, his disciples surely were used to this by now, and when he got tired he sat by a well and his disciples went to get food. Not normal for Jews and Samaritans to be shopping together but Jesus was not a conventional man to follow and the disciples seem to accept this.

While Jesus waits a woman (whose name we never get to know, perhaps to emphasis the symbolism that she could represent any one of us) comes to the well to draw water. A heavy task, normally done by the younger women in a household but as we get to find out this is not a young women, so instead someone with no help from daughters or maids, an ordinary woman.

Jesus asks for a drink. Now he's done 2 pretty unconventional things here, he's asking a favour of a Samaritan whose vessel he will drink from although this sort of behaviour would never be tolerated by a normal Jew. He also addresses a woman, a real no-no in this society. Even husbands would not speak to their wives in public in case someone got the wrong end of the stick. Men and women did not mix!

Understandably the woman is surprised but not silenced by this odd man, she challenges him on why he talks to her, why he wants water from her. And when Jesus begins to explain that he is different, when he says "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" the woman challenges him again, "are you greater than Jacob".

Here is a woman who knows her scripture although Jesus' rather cryptic words are baffling to her. Jesus goes on to ask her to bring her husband and she says she has none. An attempt to not have to explain her domestic arrangements it seems because Jesus then says, you are right, you have had several husbands but the man you are now with is not your husband. And suddenly this could be the topic of a daytime tv talk show, this woman is living with a man, her current partner as we would describe it in today's terms, to whom she is not married and clearly she is no stranger to controversy and perhaps a bit of a source of gossip in her community.

But on hearing Jesus tell her this her eyes are opened, she understands he is the messiah. You see the Samaritans were hated by the Jews not because they were so different, but because they were so similar. They were mixed race from the time of the exile but followed a form of the Jewish faith, tweaked a bit, and that was the basis of the disputes. Yet one thing Samaritans held in common with Jews was their expectation of the messiah, the promise of God fulfilled. This woman recognised Jesus, the least of her community perhaps, a woman certainly, yet it was she who encountered Christ and recognised him for who he was.

Not only that, but this story goes on to tell how she ran back to the village and told her neighbours that she had met the messiah, by her testimony some of the villagers believed. She may not have been the most upstanding citizen but her passionate witness to the gospel she had encountered won some over immediately.

But it doesn't end there, she then brings back her neighbours to Jesus, offering to share with them the encounter she had experienced and on meeting Jesus many more believed and invited he and his disciples to stay in the village and they did for 2 days.

Well, what did the disciples think of this when they got back? As usual they missed the point entirely. They challenged Jesus on talking to the woman, they'd got over the Samaritan hurdle but they couldn't quite believe he was having a conversation with this woman on the street. They wanted Jesus to eat, that's why they had gone, to fetch food, but Jesus was doing God's will, he was revealing himself to those with a yearning to believe and he was feeling fed spiritually which became far more pressing than satisfying physical needs.

He had found a lost sheep, and brought her back to the fold, but she had gone on to be an apostle to others, bringing everyone she could, literally, to Christ. It is an amazing story of an amazing encounter. But what of the image of water?

Well we know that we can't live without it, it is a source of life and health and also cleanliness. We use water as a symbol in religious life just as we cling to it as a necessity in our physical lives. But Jesus compares himself to water, denoting to us that he too is necessary in our lives. Not to physically survive but to spiritually survive. The Samaritan woman had lost her way in her chaotic life of many husbands, she had thirsted after things that had not ultimately brought her satisfaction. Jesus sees her still restless, still searching and offers her the one thing that can fill the gap in her life, right relationship with God.

Just as the Jews had become impatient in the wilderness, looking for physical things before spiritual things, so we are at risk of doing the same. But Jesus says, slow down, look again, find the one thing that will satisfy your spiritual thirst then the circumstances of your physical life will lose all importance. Look to the Lord and drink deeply from the living water, that you may experience that peace which passes understanding and never yearn again for the things that cannot fill the God shaped gaps in our lives.

Amen.