

**Living Water***John 4:5-42*

Good news happens in unexpected places and often in chance encounters. Jesus is off the beaten path, not in the usual areas of His life and ministry, Judea and Galilee. As He travelled about He had to go through another territory, Samaria. In this foreign place, and tired from the journey, Jesus sits at a well while the disciples are sent off to search for food. And it is here, in this place beyond the bounds, a good news conversation takes place.

Not only is this a conversation in an unexpected place, it occurs between two individuals of very different status and social standing. The animosity between Jews and Samaritans and the difference in social standing of a woman and a man would have been well known by the early Gospel readers. It was an ancient rivalry and was a by-word for mistrust, suspicion and animosity. Two people, on the edge, both in places they ought not to have been, talking to people they ought not to talk to, yet here they are, by a well, thirsty.

She belongs to a minority group, pushed down and without value. She has lived with five men, and the man she now lives with is not her husband. She is rejected by her own people. She is a woman with a broken self-image, who has deep feelings of guilt and worthlessness, who feels nobody could ever really love her.

Is it because she feels rejected and mocked by her people that she comes to draw water all alone, at midday, when the sun is at its highest? Most women came to the well early in the morning, but this one, rejected and ashamed, wanted to avoid meeting others. She came when nobody else was likely to be there.

Except Jesus, the Jewish man, the rabbi.

This is the only time in the gospels that we hear that Jesus is tired. He is alone. The disciples have gone to find food. He's tired after a long journey. Maybe He was tired of the men who did not seem to understand Him and quarrelled among themselves.

She is thirsty, and alone. He is thirsty, and alone. And there is a connection. They talk of water, and the well, but there is something deeper going on here. Jesus somehow knows the depth of this woman's negative image and fragility. He doesn't judge, or condemn, or condescend to her. He approaches like a tired, thirsty beggar, and asks her to do something for Him. He trusts her, and in trusting her, He uplifts her and gives her back some of her self-esteem.

A lesson for us? To accept and love broken people in Jesus' way is the surest way to help them to grow. Accepting them, seeing the good, even the little bit of good in them, just as they are, despite all their weakness and brokenness.

There are lots of meetings at wells in the Bible. Rebecca, Isaac's bride, was found by Abraham's servant by a well. Jacob met Rachel at a well. Moses met Zipporah, his future wife, at a well. Wells are sometimes seen as places of love. Jesus in this story comes to reveal His love to all who are seeking to draw water from the well of love.

The thirst, on the face of it, is for water, but the underlying thirst is for the living water that is love. Water gives life. When there is no rain, the land is dry, the crops die and people die of hunger. When there is no love, our lives are dry, our personalities shrivel and we die of loneliness. Water is the symbol of God's Spirit – it's one of the key ideas in baptism. And where God's Spirit is, there is love. Today, for Florence. Today, for you and for me.

A writer notes that when he hears the woman of Samaria speak, he hears the terrible and painful cry of humanity, of so many of us, I am lonely and guilty. Nobody is really committed to me. Nobody really understands me. It is a cry of anguish. But Jesus says, drink this 'living water', and you will have love, and life, and hope. You will have God.

Note this also. The One Who comes to offer the gift of living water in this story is Himself tired. He comes to us and asks for our help. He has no bucket, and the well is deep. It is a vulnerable Jesus Who comes asking us for help, so that God's love can be tasted and shared. Jesus asks for water from the most despised and broken woman. She is no one; she is not even given a name; she is nothing in the eyes of society. Yet it is to her that He comes asking for water, so that He might share the water of life with her, and with others.

The disciples return, and are astonished that Jesus is speaking with a woman. They want to offer Him food, but He is being nourished by the sharing of living water, and bringing life and hope and love to the world.

In her excitement, the woman has run to the village to bring others. She has become an apostle and an evangelist, this unnamed, broken woman. She is transformed from shame to hopefulness, from shadow to light. The villagers come and meet Jesus for themselves, and He stays with them, beyond the boundaries, in the middle of stranger-enemies, for two days.

People in need, given sustenance. People on the outside, brought in. People at the bottom of the pile, lifted up. People thirsting for love, given the living water of God.

At baptism, amongst the many things to think about, these thoughts must play their part. The inclusion and welcome and hospitality of God played out around the water of the font.

These days are tough, particularly as talk of 'social distancing' because of the Coronavirus increases. I hate that phrase, 'social distancing', though I understand why it may be necessary. It cuts against everything I believe in about my faith, and what Jesus comes to do. This virus, cruel and disruptive though it is, whilst not exactly a blessing, might yet turn to highlighting something already corroding our world. The virus of loneliness and social isolation has been at work for a long time. Might it be, as in times of other crisis, often weather related, that in these uncertain, unnerving times, people may yet again be forced to look around that the communities we have made and unmade around us? We gather in the comfort and beauty of this church, around the font, to welcome and share in the warmth of a baptism. But probably no more than a few hundred feet from this building, there are people already isolated, alone, cut off, marginalised. By age, or illness, or unemployment, or something else that separates them from the rest. And now this cruel virus highlights that, not only for them, but for the rest of us.

How fragile life and happiness and health can be. If not this virus, then some other tragedy or injustice or unfairness. Yet here we are, in church today, not far from a font, with water in it, symbol of God's living water, with a weary Saviour somewhere in the building. Might it be, might it just be that having witnessed this baptism today, and having noted that our usual means of welcoming

in and being hospitable are taken from us by the closure of a kitchen, that we are being, somehow, propelled to think of other ways to make connection, and show our care and love and concern for those who need that life and love and compassion?

Social distancing may be a pending physical reality, but how will we deal with those a metre away from us, at the well of life, needing our support and love? How will we use phones and email and Whatsapp and Facebook and Twitter to reach down into the well of loneliness and draw out the living water that will give life and love? How will we slip notes through letterboxes or under doors and ask if there is anything we can do to help?

This baptism today, this encounter with Jesus and the Spirit of God, does not simply end at the font and as we leave the Church. We go out into the city, back into our separated, virus-threatened, isolated lives, seeing the broken and the vulnerable, and dream up ways of bringing the living water of God's love to them, through our acceptance, through our action, through our compassion. It is a team effort. In the water, at the baptism, despite the virus, God still works, reaches out, and loves. So must we.

**In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit**

**Amen**