

Sunday 12 March 2023
Holy Trinity – Holy Communion (8.00am)
Third Sunday of Lent

Exodus 17:1-7
Romans 5:1-11
John 4:5-42

So, quite a long passage and with a huge amount going on - and in typical John fashion, absolutely packed with symbolism.
So, let's try and see if we can unpack some this.....

Here we are, two thousand years ago, and a Samaritan woman arrives at an ancient well needing water to quench her thirst. She had probably been coming to that very well every day for years.
However, on this particular day there was a stranger there - it was Jesus. She has no idea who he is but he puzzles her. She's puzzled because.....
He was a man - apart from the obvious, socially this set him apart from her.....
What's more, he was a Jewish man.....
she may even have recognised that he had the status of a Rabbi.

But, more than all of that, she was a woman - and most significantly, a Samaritan woman - and possibly also a woman of doubtful morality.

The passage tells us that they met at the sixth hour which would have been noon by our reckoning. We could possibly assume that she would only come to the well in the midday heat because she wasn't welcome to come with the other 'respectable' women of the village who would have done so in the cool of the early morning or may be in the evening.
Anyway, here was Jesus holding a normal conversation with her - he even asked her for a drink and, horror of horrors, Jesus didn't have a cup so he would have to share hers.
Let's put all of that into context.....

Back in those days, Jews didn't get on with Samaritans and, under the conventions of that time, a man simply wouldn't speak to any woman in that way.

Whatever the woman's status is, it doesn't rattle Jesus. Soon their conversation turns to the water.

Jesus speaks of a '**living water**' - a water that will leave a person never having to thirst again. As her response seems to pour out of her, we get a sense of her suffering and her marginalisation. But Jesus lets her in on a secret - her life has been no secret to him and he lays her past out before her - including her non-stellar track record for marriage.

All of this seems to have completely put her back up - but she gathers her wits and gives what seems to be a pretty sharp retort..... **"OK, so you're a prophet"** and then in an almost accusing tone..... **"this is our mountain..... it's for Samaritans..... we've worshipped here for generations and you Jews tell us that the only proper place to worship is Jerusalem..... what do you say to that?"**

You can just imagine Jesus sitting back at this point and thinking that this woman needs to hear the basics..... and the basics is exactly what she gets.

"Woman, believe me" he says..... "a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and in truth, for they are the kind of worshippers the Father seeks".

In other words, Jesus is saying..... it's not about when, it's not about how and it's not about where you worship - this is about worshipping God with a pure spirit.

This was simply an instruction to the woman at the well, but it is a serious warning to the church today. It's something that should be a guiding principle for every one of us!!

At this point we see a complete change in her attitude.... she softens and she says.....

"I know the Messiah is coming, and when he comes, he will tell us everything".

Just then something quite remarkable happens..... Jesus admits to her that he is that very Messiah.

For her it was a moment of utter transformation..... she has forgotten WHO she is, but at that very moment she has realised WHOSE she is. So then, at the point where the disciples belatedly turn up, she drops her water jar and rushes back to her village.

John's Gospel account is full of stories of confusion and misunderstandings. Here we have the Samaritan woman being completely thrown by the idea of a Jewish man engaging her in conversation and all that followed.

The woman has rushed back to her village and the story is now interrupted by another account of confusion and misunderstanding..... the disciples have turned up and they're going on about food..... they have just set out their picnic lunch and are urging Jesus to eat something. But Jesus isn't interested in any of that because he's trying to explain to them about the harvest of the mission field. A harvest which is right in front of them and ripe for action straight away.

Meanwhile, having got back to where she lived, the woman tells everyone she meets.....

“Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did, Could this be the Christ?”

As a result, both her world and the world of those who came to believe because of her invitation, would never be the same again.

So, where do we fit in to all of this?

Crucially, Jesus hadn't condemned the Samaritan woman for her life circumstances..... Exactly the opposite in fact..... He offered her new birth and living water.

We presumably like to think that if we were faced, as that Samaritan woman was, with Jesus in person, declaring “I am the Messiah, we wouldn't hesitate for an instant. We wouldn't 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.

From time to time, we all face difficult situations of one kind or another..... whether it's the dead end job, the depression that just won't lift, the family we dread facing, the addiction we simply can't break, the bleakness of the future, the relationship that traps us or the grief that still overwhelms us..... we can all end up in our own particular wilderness.

So, here we are on a Sunday morning in March, when we have to go home from Church and resume our daily lives, deal with all the stuff that brings with it the usual amounts of frustration and satisfaction, however unworthy we may feel, God's mercy is there.

It's all around us, long before we even think to look.

The hard part is not that we have to deserve God's mercy, because we don't.

The hard part is that all we have to do is just accept it.

Amen.