**St Andrew’s on The Terrace Sunday 19 March 2017 Lent Three John 4: 5-42**

John 4: 5So he came to a town in Samaria called Sychar, near the plot of ground Jacob had given to his son Joseph. 6Jacob’s well was there, and Jesus, tired as he was from the journey, sat down by the well. It was about noon. 7When a Samaritan woman came to draw water, Jesus said to her, “Will you give me a drink?” 8(His disciples had gone into the town to buy food.) 9The Samaritan woman said to him, *“You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?”* (For Jews do not associate with Samaritans.) 10Jesus answered her, “If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water.” 11“*Sir,”* the woman said, *“you have nothing to draw with and the well is deep. Where can you get this living water? 12Are you greater than our father Jacob, who gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did also his sons and his livestock?”* 13Jesus answered, “Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, 14but whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life.” 15The woman said to him, *“Sir, give me this water so that I won’t get thirsty and have to keep coming here to draw water.”* 16He told her, “Go, call your husband and come back.” 17*“I have no husband,”* she replied. Jesus said to her, “You are right when you say you have no husband. 18The fact is, you have had five husbands, and the man you now have is not your husband. What you have just said is quite true.” 19*“Sir,”* the woman said, *“I can see that you are a prophet. 20Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you Jews claim that the place where we must worship is in Jerusalem.”* 21“Woman,” Jesus replied, “believe me, a time is coming when you will worship God neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. 22You Samaritans worship what you do not know; we worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews. 23Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship God in Spirit and in truth, for they are the kind of worshipers God seeks. 24God is spirit, and worshipers must worship God in the Spirit and in truth.”

25The woman said, “*I know that Messiah” (called Christ) “is coming. When he comes, he will explain everything to us.”* 26Then Jesus declared, “I, the one speaking to you—I am he.”

**The Disciples Rejoin Jesus**

27Just then his disciples returned and were surprised to find him talking with a woman. But no one asked, “What do you want?” or “Why are you talking with her?” 28Then, leaving her water jar, the woman went back to the town and said to the people, 29*“Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did. Could this be the Messiah?”* 30They came out of the town and made their way toward him. 31Meanwhile his disciples urged him, *“Rabbi, eat something.”* 32But he said to them, “I have food to eat that you know nothing about.” 33Then his disciples said to each other, *“Could someone have brought him food?”* 34“My food,” said Jesus, “is to do the will of the one who sent me and to finish the work. 35Don’t you have a saying, ‘It’s still four months until harvest’? I tell you, open your eyes and look at the fields! They are ripe for harvest. 36Even now the one who reaps draws a wage and harvests a crop for eternal life, so that the sower and the reaper may be glad together. 37Thus the saying ‘One sows and another reaps’ is true. 38I sent you to reap what you have not worked for. Others have done the hard work, and you have reaped the benefits of their labour.”

**Many Samaritans Believe**

39Many of the Samaritans from that town believed in him because of the woman’s testimony, “He told me everything I ever did.” 40So when the Samaritans came to him, they urged him to stay with them, and he stayed two days. 41And because of his words many more became believers. 42They said to the woman, “We no longer believe just because of what you said; now we have heard for ourselves, and we know.”

Some years ago this story came up in the cycle. A friend read the reflection I gave then. She then bluntly told me I had missed the point! I had spent some time talking about the geography of Sychar - which is modern day Nablos - the place where Jesus and the woman meet at the well. Also I spent time on the history of the mutual antipathy between Jews and Samaritans, an antipathy which even Jesus shows a touch of here.

So today, in the printed reflection, there is more information on both those backgrounds for those who want it. Suffice to say now that first, Jesus and the woman at this particular well would have been in full sight of Mt Garizim to which she refers. She probably would have lifted her head and pointed to the mountain as she said: “*Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain”.*

Second, the enmity between Jews and Samaritans is like the antipathy between Serbs and Croats, with a twist, as both Jews and Samaritans are Jewish by race. The stand-off goes back about half a millennium before Jesus’ birth right back to the return from the Babylonian exile in 516 BCE. Not all the Jewish people were deported to Babylon, only from the southern kingdom of Judah. Those who remained in the northern kingdom of Israel intermarried in the meantime. When the southern Jews returned 70 years later, the northerners, the group now known as Samaritans, at first wanted to help in the rebuilding, but were rejected and so took revenge in delaying the re-building project. The hatred between the two groups remains to this day and was strong in Jesus’ lifetime, as you heard in the reading:“*“You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?”* (For Jews do not associate with Samaritans.)” It is this background that also makes the parable of the Good Samaritan all the more poignant since Jesus deliberately chooses a Samaritan to be the one who aids a beaten-up Jew in order to illustrate his question “Who is my neighbour?”

Given this background of prejudice and geography, what is the point of the story? There are many barriers to conversation between Jesus and this woman. Their different gender for a start, in that time, would mean Jesus would not normally have addressed the woman at all. He should have ignored her, in fact, as she came to draw water. That she comes alone to the well tells Jesus she is already ostracised by the women of the village otherwise she would be in cluster of chattering laughing women, like the bevy of girls of which Rebecca was part when she first met Isaac also at a well, much further north at Haran. Then there was the different ethnicity and the long standing enmity between their peoples which this woman and Jesus had lying between them. Of all people in that world at that time, these are two who would normally pass like ships in the night. Yet not only do they speak, Jesus ends up staying in this woman’s village, in a Samaritan village in the lea of their holy mountain, for two whole days.

The point of this story is the connection which is achieved here, the intersection of these two lives, the ability of Jesus to cut through the crap of gender and race and this woman’s natural defensiveness. It is about the willingness of this feisty woman to eventually drop her defences of slick theological argument and her playing of the race card and meet this man soul to soul. At first this woman employs what seems to be well honed defensive talk. Her presence alone at the well without her fellow countrywomen reveals that she is unusual, perhaps an outcast, non- establishment. And so it would not be surprising if she had grown a feisty covering to cover long held hurt. I’m sure you have seen that in some people talking about their changed theological beliefs. They still carry hurt and resentment at how badly they feel they were treated in times gone by. Suddenly they can jump down your throat, or laugh derisively when you suggest there might be more to it. You will probably have had such a conversation somewhere in your church attendance or perhaps over the water cooler at work or the back fence with a neighbour. First this woman raises the race and gender question, then she disputes Jesus’ ability to draw water, (deliberately or unintentionally misunderstanding him), she bristles at his inviting her husband to appear and as a last ditch attempt raises the centuries old argument about which was more holy mountain Gerazim or Zion. She is working hard here not to be touched by his words and the notice he is taking of her as an individual.

 Jesus, moves the conversation to a different plane, identifies the location of worship as being less important than what is in the heart and soul, less important than spirit and truth. In doing so he seems to reach her heart and her response seems to touch his. Why do I say that? Jesus makes in response to her interaction with him, a very rare confession – he tells her he is the Anointed One who has been promised, a truth he normally asked his disciples to keep *sub judice*. At this point of real connection he wins her agreement and sets fire to her excitement. She is so taken with what has happened - perhaps we could call it a transfiguring moment – such that she runs back and rouses the whole village.

Last week we spoke of transfiguration moments and making sure we had still hearts and calm minds which were capable of noticing the transfiguring moment. This encounter at the well reminds us also of the need to be open and receptive to the stranger we might meet at the well. There is a long tradition in the Christian faith of the Christ meeting us in strangers – of meeting, we sometimes say, angels unawares. It is not going to be Jesus himself whom we bump into at the pub or cafe or water fountain. But we will meet people who need connection or we will need connection ourselves with those we encounter. We need connection and encounter ourselves with what we could call the Christ principle – that X factor which transform ordinary conversations into significant sacred events. We all need living water which keeps our soul hydrated and fresh.

These thoughts also brought to my mind the conversations we have been having about notices and events in the last week or so - we could admit somewhat gritty conversations. In those conversations we concentrated on the type of advertising, the timing, the style of event or the amount or lack of context given. As for Samaritans and Jews, location may also have played a part. Underlying the communication and miscommunication was the topic – transgender identity. Even in these inclusive days, one to one conversations with someone different from ourselves are rare for some of us. As we get older we can choose more frequently to only associate with people who are like us and think like us. In our communications last week, there was also underlying our attitudes the awkwardness which attends any meeting of people who are different from each other. The point of this encounter at the well was the honest human connection which reached beyond Jesus’ limitations here as a Jewish man and beyond the woman’s naturally defensive feistiness. Perhaps the point of our encounters is taking the time and effort to reach beyond what divides us from other people and making a connection too. People who are like us are easy to talk to, we understand each other, we know our backgrounds, share histories. People who are unlike us are harder to communicate with because we have to think more deeply, listen more carefully and be more conscious of how we are acting.

In our conversations last week about events and timing and transport and location, it has been borne in on me again how busy we all are. I am sure this woman was thankful Jesus stopped to rest on this particular day rather than walking on with the disciples to the nearest burger place; that she was grateful there was a space in his busy schedule; that there was a space where they could indeed connect. May there be spaces in our worlds – space in which to connect with our deeper Self; space in which to connect with the Other; space in which to connect with the sacred. So may it be indeed.

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**Jacob’s well at Sychar**

Jacob’s Well, where Jesus asked a [**Samaritan**](http://www.seetheholyland.net/glossary/#samaritans)woman for a drink and offered her “living water”, lies in the crypt of a modern Greek [Orthodox](http://www.seetheholyland.net/glossary/#orthodox) church at Nablus Formerly Sychar) in the [West Bank](http://www.seetheholyland.net/glossary/#west%20bank). It is often considered the most **authentic** site in the Holy Land — since no one can move a well that was originally more than 40 metres deep. **Jewish,** Samaritan, Christian and Muslim traditions all associate the well with Jacob. The **location,** at the entrance to a mountain pass between Mount Gerizim and Mount Ebal, is 2km east of Nablus. It is near the archaeological site of Tell Balata — thought to be the biblical Shechem — and about 63km north of [Jerusalem](http://www.seetheholyland.net/jerusalem/). It was at Shechem that the patriarch Jacob bought “the land on which he had pitched his **tent”** (Genesis 33:19). The Samaritan woman reminded Jesus that Jacob “gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it”. He told her he was the promised [**Messiah**](http://www.seetheholyland.net/glossary/#messiah)**,** and she and many residents of her village believed in him. (John 4:5-42) **Mouth of Jacob’s Well** (Seetheholyland.net)

http://www.seetheholyland.net/jacobs-well/

**Why the Hatred Between the Jews and Samaritans?**

Imagine the hatred between Serbs and Muslims in modern Bosnia, the enmity between Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland or the feuding between street gangs in Los Angeles or New York, and you have some idea of the feeling and its causes between Jews and Samaritans in the time of Jesus. Both politics and religion were involved.

According to the Encyclopedic Dictionary of the Bible (McGraw Hill) by Louis F. Hartman, C.SS.R., feelings of ill will probably went back before the separation of the northern and southern Jewish kingdoms. Even then there was a lack of unity between the tribes of Jacob.

After the separation of Judah and Israel in the ninth century, King Omri of the Northern Kingdom bought the hill of Samaria from Shemer (1 Kings 16:24). He built there the city of Samaria which became his capital.

It was strong defensively and controlled the valley through which the main road ran between Jerusalem and Galilee. In 722 B.C. the city fell to the Assyrians and became the headquarters of the Assyrian province of Samarina. While many of the inhabitants of the city and the surrounding area of Samaria were led off into captivity, some farmers and others were left behind. They intermarried with new settlers from Mesopotamia and Syria.

Though the Samaritans were condemned by the Jews, Hartman says they probably had as much pure Jewish blood as the Jews who later returned from the Babylonian exile.

The story of both Israel’s and Samaria’s failures in keeping to the way of Yahweh is partly told in Chapter 17 of the Second Book of Kings. There, too, the sacred author tells how the king of As-syria sent a priest from among the exiles to teach the Samaritans how to worship God after an attack by lions was attributed to their failure to worship the God of the land. Second Kings recounts how worship of Yahweh was mixed with the worship of strange gods.

When Cyrus permitted the Jews to return from the Babylonian exile, the Samaritans were ready to welcome them back. The exiles, however, despised the Samaritans as renegades. When the Samaritans wanted to join in rebuilding the Temple in Jerusalem, their assistance was rejected. You will find this in the Book of Ezra, Chapter Four.

With the rejection came political hostility and opposition. The Samaritans tried to undermine the Jews with their Persian rulers and slowed the rebuilding of Jerusalem and its temple. Nehemiah tells us (Nehemiah 13:28-29) that a grandson of the high priest, Eliashib, had married a daughter of Sanballat, the governor of the province of Samaria.

For defiling the priesthood by marrying a non-Jewish woman, Nehemiah drove Eliashib from Jerusalem–though Sanballat was a worshiper of Yahweh. According to the historian Josephus, Sanballat then had a temple built on Mount Garizim in which his son-in-law Eliashib could function. Apparently this is when the full break between Jews and Samaritans took place.

According to John McKenzie in his Dictionary of the Bible, the Samaritans later allied themselves with the Seleucids in the Maccabean wars and in 108 B.C. the Jews destroyed the Samaritan temple and ravaged the territory. Around the time of Jesus’ birth, a band of Samaritans profaned the Temple in Jerusalem by scattering the bones of dead people in the sanctuary. In our own era which has witnessed the vandalism of synagogues and the burning of black churches, we should be able to understand the anger and hate such acts would incite.

The fact that there was such dislike and hostility between Jews and Samaritans is what gives the use of the Samaritan in the Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:29-37) such force! The Samaritan is the one who is able to rise above the bigotry and prejudices of centuries and show mercy and compassion for the injured Jew after the Jew’s own countrymen pass him by!

It is with those centuries of opposition and incidents behind their peoples that we can understand the surprise of the Samaritan woman (John 4:9) when Jesus rises above the social and religious restrictions not just of a man talking to a woman, but also of a Jew talking to a Samaritan.

You can find more about the story of the rift between Jews and Samaritans in the various biblical dictionaries and commentaries, and scattered through the historical and prophetical books of the Old Testament.

https://www.franciscanmedia.org/the-rift-between-jews-and-samaritans/