

## St Andrew's on the Terrace 21 July 2019 Pentecost 6. 'Myth misunderstood at the well.'

### Readings for the Gathering

#### Hebrew Bible

<sup>18</sup> After Jacob came from Paddan Aram, he arrived safely at the city of Shechem in Canaan and camped within sight of the city. <sup>19</sup> For a hundred pieces of silver, he bought from the sons of Hamor, the father of Shechem, the plot of ground where he pitched his tent. <sup>20</sup> There he set up an altar and called it El Elohe Israel.

#### Genesis 33: 18-20

#### Gospel

#### Jesus Talks With a Samaritan Woman

#### John 4

<sup>4</sup> Now Jesus learned that the Pharisees had heard that he was gaining and baptizing more disciples than John—<sup>2</sup> although in fact it was not Jesus who baptized, but his disciples. <sup>3</sup> So he left Judea and went back once more to Galilee. <sup>4</sup> Now he had to go through Samaria. <sup>5</sup> So he came to a town in Samaria called Sychar, near the plot of ground Jacob had given to his son Joseph. <sup>6</sup> Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired as he was from the journey, sat down by the well. It was about noon. <sup>7</sup> When a Samaritan woman came to draw water, Jesus said to her, "Will you give me a drink?" <sup>8</sup> (His disciples had gone into the town to buy food.) <sup>9</sup> The 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.) <sup>10</sup> Jesus 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." <sup>11</sup> "Sir," the woman said, "you have nothing to draw with and the well is deep. Where can you get this living water?" <sup>12</sup> Are you greater than our father Jacob, who gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did also his sons and his livestock?" <sup>13</sup> Jesus answered, "Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, <sup>14</sup> but 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." <sup>15</sup> The 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." <sup>16</sup> He told her, "Go, call your husband and come back." <sup>17</sup> "I have no husband," she replied. Jesus said to her, "You are right when you say you have no husband. <sup>18</sup> The 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." <sup>19</sup> "Sir," the woman said, "I can see that you are a prophet. <sup>20</sup> Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you Jews claim that the place where we must worship is in Jerusalem." <sup>21</sup> "Woman," Jesus replied, "believe me, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. <sup>22</sup> You Samaritans worship what you do not know; we worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews. <sup>23</sup> Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in the Spirit and in truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. <sup>24</sup> God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in the Spirit and in truth." <sup>25</sup> The woman said, "I know that Messiah" (called Christ) "is coming. When he comes, he will explain everything to us." <sup>26</sup> Then Jesus declared, "I, the one speaking to you—I am he."

**The Disciples Rejoin Jesus** <sup>27</sup> Just 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?" <sup>28</sup> Then, leaving her water jar, the woman went back to the town and said to the people, <sup>29</sup> "Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did. Could this be the Messiah?" <sup>30</sup> They came out of the town and made their way toward him. <sup>31</sup> Meanwhile his disciples urged him, "Rabbi, eat something." <sup>32</sup> But he said to them, "I have food to eat that you know nothing about." <sup>33</sup> Then his disciples said to each other, "Could someone have brought him food?" <sup>34</sup> "My food," said Jesus, "is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work. <sup>35</sup> Don'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. <sup>36</sup> Even 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. <sup>37</sup> Thus the saying 'One sows and another reaps' is true. <sup>38</sup> I 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** <sup>39</sup> Many of the Samaritans from that town believed in him because of the woman's testimony, "He told me everything I ever did." <sup>40</sup> So when the Samaritans came to him, they urged him to stay with them, and he stayed two days. <sup>41</sup> And because of his words many more became believers. <sup>42</sup> They said to the woman, "We no longer believe just because of what you said; now we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this man really is the Saviour of the world."

#### Contemporary reading

#### from "The Age of Spirit"

May 20, 2019, <https://cac.org/the-age-of-spirit-2019-05-20/>

The Spirit is like a homing device put inside of us, and all creation, too. For all of our ignorance and mistakes, there is in everything this deep, internal dignity convinced of its own value. This divine indwelling keeps insisting, "I am what I am seeking!"

### Reflection for the Gathering

The heading for the Gospel reading "Jesus meets with a Samaritan woman" is about as shocking headline as Minister for Broadcasting Claire Curran meeting a senior editor from Radio New Zealand in a coffee shop just as restructuring at RNZ was a political football.

On the surface, given the gender and national and religious politics of his time, this meeting between Jesus and a Samaritan woman should never have happened. It is a well-known fact the Jews had “no associations with the Samaritans” That is the basis of the equally shocking encounter between the Samaritan and the Jewish man left beaten up beside the road from Jerusalem to Jericho in the story we know as the Good Samaritan – a title which for the Jews of the time would have been an oxymoron.

This isn't just about geography – the enmity of Jesus' time dates back over 500 years to when some of the Israelite nation were taken into captivity in Babylon. This occurred some 586 years before Christ. Some of the Israelites were left behind. This remnant intermarried with local tribes and over time, developed slightly different worship practices, including, as this woman claims, venerating Mount Gerizim. This mountain overlooks the current day city of Nablus where Jacob's well is situated, the well at which, this story states Jesus and the woman are situated. Samaritans are in fact therefore Jewish by origin, though variations such as this had crept into their religious practice.

Their intermarrying was also viewed with disfavour by other Jews. The Jewish population finally released from Babylon in disparate groups, found this variation had happened. They disputed the veneration of Mt Gerizim over the Temple Mount in Jerusalem. So, when this woman names the issue of where worship would happen and should happen, she goes right to the nub of the religious difference between Jews and Samaritans. To underscore this, in rabbinical literature, it is stated that in order to become an orthodox Jew a Samaritan must explicitly renounce any veneration of Mt Gerizim over the Temple Mt (which was the ancient Mt Moriah.)

The Samaritans believe Isaac near sacrifice happened on Gerizim whereas mainstream Jews believe it happened on the site of the present Temple Mount in Jerusalem. Like Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland and Serbs and Croats in Bosnia, the lines were tightly drawn and passionately held. So this meeting at this famous well in the heart of Samaritan territory is a scandal, without taking into account the fact that Jesus was male and the woman female. An unrelated male and female would probably not speak to each other even if they were of the same religious group.

Just the symbolism of the characters and the setting of this story already would have neon signs flashing in the minds of those hearing this story from the Gospels as they were read in the early Church. In such a significant setting – Jacob's well one of the spiritual icons of Samaritan religion; under the shadow of their holy mountain - we find the revered Jewish rabbi Jesus talking with a person who is not only a Samaritan but also a woman. The early hearers of this story would expect the following story to deliver stunning revelations and metaphorically would be on the edge of their seats.

Jesus and the woman engage over water initially. He asks for water. She reminds them of their disparate identities. He then makes a symbolic statement about being one who can deliver spiritually significant water. Deliberately or not, the woman retreats part way back into concrete reality – asking about Jesus' lack of a bucket with which to draw living water from this real well. She takes his claim as a challenge to the ancestor Jacob whose well it was believed to be, reminding Jesus he is on Samaritan spiritual territory.

When Jesus maintains the focus on living water which will satisfy eternally, the woman seems to drop her argumentative misunderstanding of the symbolic level and asks for that living water ...but then by the end of the sentence shows she is still consciously or unconsciously obscuring the symbolic, mythic importance of this conversation with concrete reality. She resists the mythic content of what Jesus is saying. She is in denial that it the myth will sustain her, not concrete reality.

Jesus cuts through her defences with his question about her husband. Whether the woman had had five legal husbands or whether this is a euphemism for her being a prostitute it is hard to tell. The system of

levirate marriage where women were married to their deceased husband's brother could have been a factor here – like the story of Tamar who went through two such marriages and then found the third brother was not offered to her in marriage. This woman could have been married to four brothers but refused marriage from the fifth, leaving her literally in no-man's land. It is this apparently supernatural knowledge of her situation that impressed the woman to take Jesus prophetic nature seriously. She then immediately, eagerly asks this wise man the key question in dispute between Jews and Samaritans – the sanctity or otherwise of the rival mountains, Gerizim and the Temple Mount.

Jesus' reply first seems to be parochially Jewish but as he finishes his theological statement he indicates that there will come a time when such local parochial views will be passé. "Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship God in the Spirit and in truth, for they are the kind of worshipers God seeks. God is spirit, and God's worshipers must worship in the Spirit and in truth." The condition of the heart is what is important, says Jesus, not worship's geographical location. Jesus then, amazingly, reveals himself to her as the Messiah who is long awaited by both Jews and Samaritans. This makes her only the third person to whom Jesus reveals and endorses his identity in the Gospels – the others being Peter and Martha.

Then the conversation is interrupted by the return of the disciples who have been to the local Subway for lunch. Their surprise at the encounter is noted. You can imagine that as the group of mainly men begin their own private conversation, the woman fills her jar and slips away back home. Not so quiet when she gets to the village however, for she tells the whole village this man is someone they *have* to encounter for themselves. In the meantime, the disciples have been having a similar conversation with Jesus about bread as he had had with the woman about water. They display the same initial inability to understand his talk about living bread. I suspect that Jesus' outburst about reaping the fields comes from his despair that his own close group will ever get what he is on about. We don't find out in this story whether they ever get the point of this conversation or not, unlike the foreign woman.

The villagers stream back out to the well site. The whole Samaritan village comes out and invites Jesus on to their patch, proving again his point that prophets can often be more effective away from home than on home territory. And there is one final gem at the end of this chapter. "They said to the woman, "We no longer believe just because of what you said; now we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this man really is the Saviour of the world."

The faith, trust or belief we develop on the spiritual journey which makes any real difference to us is the faith and trust we are personally given the grace to develop for ourselves.

Not a set of beliefs held by the church which we copy,

Not a way of life we adopt from someone else or because we are told we should, but a living encounter.

It is like the picture on the front of the order of service – we need to go deep within, down the well, to where the aquifer, deep down beneath the ground on which our feet stand, runs clear and pure.

It needs to be our effort, our encounter, our bucket,  
but the *grace* of the situation is that  
the water is for everyone who reaches deep down and drinks

Living water which means we will never thirst again  
as long as we keep coming to the well every day.

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