

A River Through The Desert

Week 2: The Water Well

1 Reflection



A spring at Ein Gedi in the desert

Water is a vital element in the sustenance of human life. We can survive without water to drink for four days at most. In ancient civilisations, dwellings would only be built around, or near, a reliable fresh water supply. In Jerusalem, it was the Gihon Spring in the Kidron Valley which enabled King David to make the city his capital. If there was no spring, then an underwater supply would need to be found and if successful, then a well could be built over it to enable water to be collected and carried.

In ancient Israel, as across the entire hot and dry climate of the Middle East where water is not readily available, springs, wells and cisterns, were especially important because for large parts of the year, there was not enough rainwater to sustain the life of humans or animals. This Lent course, entitled *A River Through*

The Desert, is itself a reminder of the significance of water to the essence of life. For those of us who have not grown up in such a climate or culture, there is much to learn about living in a society where water is such a precious commodity. It is challenging for us that scientists predict that the climate crisis is going to make water shortages and conflicts arising from this, a far more common part of life around the world.

In the light of all this, it is not surprising that water in its many forms, features significantly in the Bible, in both Old and New Testaments. Once again there are resonances between the two halves which provide a rich vein of study for us. Perhaps this is never more true than in the story of the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4:1-42), a story unique to the fourth gospel. Right at the start of the narrative, allusion is made to former times by reference to 'the Samaritan town of Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son, Joseph' and to Jacob's well there (John 4:5-6).



Bronze Age remains of Shechem in the midst of modern Nablus

Sychar also goes by the name Shechem and is now a significant town in the West Bank, called Nablus. Abram and Sarai pass through Shechem (Genesis 12:4-9) but it is their grandson, Jacob who settles there with his family and thereafter, it becomes an important Jewish town.

It is another water well, many miles away, where Jacob first meets Rachel, falls in love with her and later marries her (Genesis 29:1-12). They meet at the well because Jacob needs a drink and Rachel brings her flock of sheep to the same place for them to be refreshed. It beautifully illustrates the significant feature that wells served fulfilling the practical and vital purpose of satisfying thirst, but also as a place of meeting.

It was the role of young women to make the daily journeys to the well to get the households' water supply. Because of this, men knew that if they wished to 'chance upon' a particular young woman, this was a good place to do so. In addition to Jacob, Abraham and Moses also find their wives in just such a way.

All of this is important context for the remarkable and highly instructive story of Jesus's encounter with a Samaritan woman at Jacob's well in Shechem. This one story, recounted beautifully in John's gospel, has so much within it that I cannot possibly do full justice to it in this short study. We will just deal with a few points to help us to consider some interesting points.

As with all Jesus's dealings with Samaritans in the gospels, there is a boundary and prejudice challenging message. Samaritans were the remnant of the northern kingdom of Israel. This nation was defeated in the 8th century BC and the people scattered. Thereafter, Samaritans were treated with scorn and contempt by the southern kingdom of Judah ('the Jews'). Interestingly, the Samaritan people and religion remains to this day and the community is centered in Nablus and their worship takes place on Mt Gerazim, in that vicinity. By engaging with Samaritans at all, Jesus was breaking taboos and undermining the prejudice of the Jews who treated Samaritans as heretics and tried to avoid mixing with them altogether.



Icon in the Church of St Photina, Nablus

The history of the well in ancient Shechem and modern day Nablus and of the Church built over it, is interesting. It is not on every pilgrim groups' itinerary, but it never fails to move all the groups that we ever take there. Under the watchful and paternalistic eye of the Greek



Orthodox priest of the Church of St Photina the Samaritan Woman, the building has become a rich tapestry of beautiful icons all over the church. The ancient well itself, situated in the crypt and no longer in the open air, still evokes something of the encounter between Christ and the Samaritan woman. The icons surrounding it draw our close attention to their fascinating dialogue.

The text tells us that the encounter took place at noon (John 4:6). This is not the usual

time of day to come to draw water unless you are wanting to avoid meeting people which would be inevitable in the morning and evening which was the customary time. Jesus is sitting by the well and when the woman arrives, rather than stepping away as convention required to indicate no bad intentions, Jesus asks her to draw water for him. She is shocked because for a Jew to speak to a Samaritan and for a man to speak to an unaccompanied woman was very much not the norm. This, of course, is the other boundary crossing which we see Jesus transgressing. The significance of this may not have been fully comprehended for many generations, but this story has become a significant inspiration for the liberation of women in the church and in wider society in modern times. It is hard to overstress how challenging to cultural norms Jesus's engagement with the Samaritan woman was.



Mary's Well at Ein Kerem

It is a deep tragedy that despite such prejudice-defying accounts of Jesus's life and teaching that the Church and the contexts in which it is situated throughout the world continues to perpetuate racism and sexism which damages all of us. It is also important to remember that Christians (and all Palestinians) are on the receiving end of dreadful racism at the hands of those Jewish Israelis who do not acknowledge the right of Palestinians to live in their historic lands. Incidents of harassment and violence occur today in Nablus by Jewish settlers against

Palestinians living there. Clearly, anti-Semitism is also a continuing cancer in the world today.

The Samaritan woman is an inspiring example of an assertive and articulate woman who Jesus affirms and further empowers. According to fifth century Greek tradition she is called St Photina (meaning 'enlightened' or 'luminous') because she became convinced that Jesus was the promised Messiah and she testified about him in the city and 'many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of her testimony.' (John 4:39). Perhaps she should be acknowledged as the first female Christian preacher and an example for all people.

Here in this place, in the hot and dusty climate of the Holy Land, beside an ancient water well, we are reminded that Jesus is the living water who can satisfy our deepest thirst for meaning and purpose in life. We are challenged to do as St Photina did: to proclaim that Jesus is 'truly the Saviour of the world' (John 4:42) and that he breaks down walls of division.

2 **Watch the film:** *The production of this film has been affected by lockdown regulations. It will be posted to YouTube as soon as possible and certainly before week two of Lent.*

3 **Bible reading:** John 4:1-42

Read the passage once or twice and spend some time considering the details of the story.

4 Questions

- 1 John's description of Jesus's conversation with the Samaritan woman makes a play on physical thirst and spiritual thirst. What is your experience of spiritual thirst? How is that thirst quenched for you?
- 2 Spend some time looking at the icon. Icons make a great deal of hand gestures, head position and eyes. Consider what is said in the film. What do you see? What might it mean? The rock formations represent Mt Gerazim and Mt Ebal which surround Shechem/Nablus. What else do you see in the icon?
- 3 Jesus's teaching powerfully challenges prejudices relating to ethnicity (Gentiles and Samaritans) and to gender. Have you experienced such prejudice in the church? What has been your response to this? What other lessons can be taken from this story?
- 4 Spend some time reflecting on how the woman's feelings would have changed through the complexities of this encounter with Jesus. Reflect on this in the light of the Eucharist. How are we made hungry and thirsty and how are these needs satisfied? What are you thirsty for?

You might like to spend some time in prayer.

You might like to reflect further on this session and write down anything you want to hold on to.

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