

## A MEDITATION FOR LENT

### II - THE SAMARITAN WOMAN AT THE WELL

*Now when Jesus learned that the Pharisees had heard, 'Jesus is making and baptizing more disciples than John'— although it was not Jesus himself but his disciples who baptized— he left Judea and started back to Galilee. But he had to go through Samaria. So he came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon.*

*A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, 'Give me a drink'. (His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.) The Samaritan woman said to him, 'How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?' (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.) Jesus answered her, 'If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, "Give me a drink", you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water.' The woman said to him, 'Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?' Jesus said to her, 'Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.' The woman said to him, 'Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water.'*

*Jesus said to her, 'Go, call your husband, and come back.' The woman answered him, 'I have no husband.' Jesus said to her, 'You are right in saying, "I have no husband"; for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!' The woman said to him, 'Sir, I see that you are a prophet. Our ancestors worshipped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem.' Jesus said to her, 'Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.' The woman said to him, 'I know that Messiah is coming' (who is called Christ). 'When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us.' Jesus said to her, 'I am he, the one who is speaking to you.' (NRSV)*

Just then his disciples came. They were astonished that he was speaking with a woman, but no one said, 'What do you want?' or, 'Why are you speaking with her?' Then the woman left her water-jar

and went back to the city. She said to the people, ‘Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?’ They left the city and were on their way to him.

There are some thirsts that cannot be quenched by water,  
even at the well in the heat of the midday sun;  
even with the bucket sent down deep and brought up overflowing, brimming, spilling.

This bodily thirst, this encounter happens in real time – at noon  
and in a real place, Jacob’s Well.

Her thirst is real and this daily, lonely effort is to slake that real thirst that returns again and again.

She walks alone, a daily slog for a Samaritan woman fallen from grace.

She has a back-story, a hinterland unknown to,  
but notorious among the local women, who shun her.

For her, there is none of the ordinary early chatter and gossip  
as the women carry their vessels in the cool of the morning  
with their children prancing and prattling along the way.

For her, there is no intimacy, no companionship,  
no one to bare her soul to, no one to understand her brokenness;  
her loneliness and isolation.

And so she appears, hazy in the distance, a solitary figure in a parched landscape,  
dragging her feet across the dust and approaches the ancestral well:  
the water source given by Jacob to his descendants, with them, the Samaritans and the Jews at enmity.

Today, as she reaches the well, she is not alone.

He is there. A man. A Jew.

He too, knows that craving for water, he knows what it is to thirst  
and he says to her,

*Give me a drink.*

She knows He should not open this conversation; should not speak to her at all.

She knows she cannot offer him her vessel, for

*Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.*

and men do not speak with women – even women like her  
who have known such ease with men.

This conversation crosses cultural boundaries and purposes.

They come from different places; She from Samaria, He from Galilee,  
she from below, the earthly realm and He from above the heavens.

She is a woman and He is a man.

Separated by conventions, they arrive on common ground,  
a life-sustaining meeting place where their shared ancestor watered his family and flocks.

A well, the meeting place of other ancestors, Moses and Zipporah,  
the place where Rebecca is courted by the messenger and carried home as a bride for Isaac;  
the messenger who asked Rebecca, give me a drink.

Where Jacob meets his beloved Rachel,  
where Hagar meets the Lord.

Jesus and the woman share these stories of their shared forefathers,  
the significance of this, she seems to miss,  
so focussed is she on the boundaries that separate them;  
the customs that keep women in their place and Samaritans despised.

So she asks Him,

*How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?*

(Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.)

*If you know the gift to God and who it is that is saying to you, "Give me a drink,"  
you would have asked him and he would have given you living water.*

*... If you knew ...*

She wants water that will quench her thirst once and for all,  
water that will save her tired, heavy legs this daily, humiliating, solitary walk to the well.

*If you knew.*

And she doesn't know. Of course, she doesn't know

That the man who stands before her is both, the source of her thirst, of her longing  
*and* the creator, the source of the living water, of life itself.

But then He tells her things about herself that he cannot possibly know.

*You have had five husbands and the one you have now is not your husband.*

Who is this man who can peer deep into her soul?

Who is this who knows her deepest, darkest humiliations?

Who is this who has searched her out and known her,

who discerns her thoughts from far, far away;

who knows her questions even before a word of them is on her tongue?

*You must be a prophet.*

*But see, this is the mountain where our ancestors worshipped,  
but your people worship in the Temple in Jerusalem.*

*Woman, the time will come and has already come  
when you will worship the Father neither here nor in Jerusalem.*

*God is Spirit, and they who worship him must worship in spirit and in truth,  
for it is such as these that the Father seeks.*

*When the Messiah comes, she says  
He will show us all things.*

*I AM He. The one who is speaking to you now. I AM.*

In a moment, as when the sun emerges suddenly from behind a cloud,  
understanding swoops down and catches her up in a single breath  
and she realises herself to be completely, utterly, fully known.  
Her most intimate thoughts and desires, her pains and wonderings,  
her darkest corners are brought out and laid bare; exposed, shining in His light.  
All her profoundest longings – for a husband, for acceptance,  
for companionship and gentleness and love  
have come to their source;  
the source that feeds across all boundaries of race or creed, or colour or gender;  
of body, mind and spirit, of heaven and earth, of time and space  
to quench all her cravings, all her longings at once.  
And as she is filled, the spring wells up inside her, gushing forth  
and she overflows with a grace that calls out to others.

*Come! Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done!  
Can he be the Messiah?*

God's living water flows into the most arid, infertile and unpromising of places  
and gives new, eternal life, universal life,  
life that overturns the boundaries that have isolated her and kept her down,  
that have separated her from her God, the great I AM.

*Come and see this man!  
Can he be the Messiah?  
Come and see.  
Come.*