

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my strength, and my redeemer.

Today, March 8th, is International Women’s Day, (and for the men here, note that International Men’s Day is on November 19th). So today we celebrate women’s achievements, and we continue to empower and uplift women.

The gospel reading for today is very relevant; Jesus interacts on an equal level with a woman who is alone, and she is a Samaritan woman.

Let’s briefly summarise what happened in this encounter.

Today’s gospel story of the Samaritan woman at the well is familiar to most. Jesus arrives at the Samaritan city of Sychar, while on his way to Galilee. It’s about the noon hour. He is thirsty and stops by a well, Jacob’s Well. Because he has no bucket to draw water, he asks a woman who is at the well, to give him a drink. The woman is amazed at such a request, “How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?” There follows a long conversation with the woman. He says, ‘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.’ ‘Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, ¹⁴ 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 says, "Sir, I see that you are a prophet," after Jesus tells her about her life.

After this follows their conversation about where God should be worshipped – on a mountain or in Jerusalem. The woman says, "I know that Messiah is coming." ... "When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us." Jesus then says to her, "I am he, the one who is speaking to you." A surprising admission to this Samaritan woman.

Why is this meeting and interaction so very significant?

The length of the conversation to begin with. Surprisingly, Jesus’s dialogue with the woman is his longest recorded conversation in the New Testament. Longer than his talks to his twelve disciples, or to his accusers, or even to his own family members.

The place of the interaction is significant. Jesus was travelling to Galilee. The direct route from Judea to Galilee passes through Samaria, but Jews often bypassed Samaria by traveling east of the Jordan, because of the antipathy between Jews and Samaritans. So why did Jesus deliberately choose this route, and why stop at this particular town of Sychar? Because of its history.

In the New Testament, Sychar is another name for Shechem. Shechem, an ancient city of great significance in biblical history, is in the hill country of Ephraim. It is situated between Mount Ebal and Mount Gerizim, which is a central location in the land of Canaan. It is first mentioned in Genesis 12:6, where Abram passed through the land to the site of Shechem, to the oak of Moreh. It is here that God promised Abram that his descendants would inherit the land. It was here that Jacob settled after his return from Paddan-Aram and where he purchased a plot of land (Genesis 33:18-19). Jacob’s well is in this place. This site later became the burial place of Joseph’s bones, which the Israelites brought up from Egypt (Joshua 24:32). Shechem is also notable for the covenant renewal ceremony led by Joshua, where he gathered all the tribes of Israel at Shechem and called them to serve Yahweh faithfully (Joshua 24:1-25). If you were at the Lenten Lunch on Wednesday, you would have heard that whole story about Shechem, the Valley of Decision for the Israelites, where they had to make the choice to worship local gods or Yahweh.

Shechem was later the place that was important to the Samaritans particularly. There had been a gradual split between the Israelites, into the Samaritan and Jewish peoples, which culminated about 125 years before Christ. Samaritans believed that Mount Gerizim was the place where God called Abraham to sacrifice Isaac (Genesis 22:2) and had established their temple there in the fourth century BC. So, the Samaritans worshipped on the mountain of Gerizim, and the Jews worshipped in Jerusalem. The split had grown into a mistrust between the two groups – and the Jews despised the Samaritans. The Jewish destruction of the Samaritan temple on Mount Gerizim finalized the separation. The woman at the well says this, “Our ancestors worshipped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem.”

So, Jesus is there, in that place, Shechem, deliberately, because of its importance in the history of the Israelites. Jesus himself is the link between the Jews and the Samaritans because of what he says next.

He tells the woman, the time will soon come when worship will not be in either place - on a mountain or in Jerusalem. Jesus says that salvation is through the Jewish lineage, that is through Jesus himself, and the time has come when true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, not in a particular place.

And so, what is inspiring for us today in this gospel story? What is it about Jesus meeting the Samaritan woman that changes our understandings?

The life-giving message that the woman has heard - about the living water that God gives. Jesus says, “Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, ¹⁴ 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.”

Jesus and the woman at the well encounter one another in a radical, life-giving way.

We all hope for just such an encounter: an authentic meeting with one other, and with Jesus our loving Messiah. It is he who knows the deepest thirsts of our hearts.

We are here in this place because we, too, want to be in a holy space, full of memories and sacred traditions – a place where our ancestors in the faith are still with us, and still worshipping. This morning, this church can be Jacob’s well, where we encounter one another as Jesus once encountered the Samaritan woman: spiritually thirsty, but with ears open, listening to one another, encountering one another and encountering Christ.

And we are here because we still believe in that promise of living water that satisfies thirsty souls. This is the bubbling of the Spirit that, in the words of John, is “gushing up to eternal life.”

We, like the Samaritan woman, have known what it means to be thirsty: and we, too, have encountered the One who offers us living water, so satisfying that we will never thirst again.

AMEN