

Living Water

We don't know her name, but the Samaritan woman in today's Gospel has the longest conversation recorded between Jesus and any person. It was noon on a hot day. Jesus, tired from travelling, chose a rest stop – Jacob's well, outside the town of Sychar – while waiting for his disciples to fetch food. The woman who joined him at the well was an outcast, looked down upon by her own people because of her immoral lifestyle. She would not have been allowed to come to the well early in the day when others were there because she was ostracised by the rest of her community. In biblical times, the well was the centre of village life and drawing water and chatting at the well was the social highpoint of many women's day. But this woman was ostracised and marked as immoral, an unmarried woman living openly with the sixth in a series of men, so she came alone, excluded from society by her scandalous lifestyle.

When this unnamed woman appeared with clay jar in hand, Jesus made a simple request: "Give me a drink." But Jews weren't supposed to speak to Samaritans. Men weren't permitted to address women without their husbands present. And rabbis had no business speaking to shady women such as this one. Jesus was willing to ignore the rules, but the woman reminded him: "You are a Jew and you ask me, a Samaritan, for a drink?" In the conversation that follows the woman begins by being flirty, coquettish, and we have an insight, perhaps, into how she has beguiled so many men. But Jesus has not come there to seduce her or to play her game, but to win her over to an utterly different way of being and a total conversion of life. He sees the deep well of natural goodness in her and the potential she has to channel the abundance of love in her heart in new directions. Without judging her, he tells her her life story, impossible for a total stranger to know, and she is won in that instant. From that moment her life is changed, she becomes a new creation and sees the world through new eyes.

She realised then that the person she was talking to was someone out of the ordinary, a holy man, a prophet who could see into the depths of her heart. Then Jesus did something I don't think he did for anyone else in the Gospels, he told her directly that he was the Messiah and it was the Messiah offering her the living water. She believed in that instant, forgot about her own need

to fetch water, and ran to tell others about Jesus. She became a powerful evangelist.

The Samaritan woman represents each one of us for we are all wounded in some way in love, and have broken relationships in our background. Whenever we feel left out, mistreated, passed over, not chosen, rejected, unsafe; whenever we feel judged, condemned, foolish or bad about ourselves, then Jesus comes to us and gives solace.

Jesus' ministering to the outcasts of Jewish society reveals that all people are valuable to God and that Jesus desires that we demonstrate love to everyone, including even our enemies. Jesus' mission to those who are lost is radical: it means leaving our comfort zone and making ourselves vulnerable in order to love people who are different from us. And great insights can come from those at the margins of society, who receive God's message with humility, trust and joy.

The story of the woman at the well teaches us that God loves every one of us, especially those of us who feel ourselves undervalued and even worthless. God values us all enough to actively seek us and engage with us. The Samaritan woman understood what this means – to be wanted, to be cared for when no one, not even she herself, could see anything good in her.