

John 4: Samaritan Woman

God be in my mouth and in my speaking, God be in our hearts and in our thinking, Amen

Let's shine some light on our truly remarkable, though very long, Gospel reading. First, some facts:

- This is the longest recorded conversation in John's Gospel.
- It's the first time in John's Gospel that Jesus says: "I am".
- and this is the *only* time in John's Gospel that Jesus says: "I'm the Messiah".

Apart from Jesus, our main character is obviously a woman. She's not named, she's a Samaritan, her marital status is questionable and it's in broad daylight when everyone can see. After talking with Jesus, we see her immediately going out and bringing others to meet him. Because of that she's often called the first apostle. The passage is 42 verses long and it's a dialogue, a conversation.

We're meant to learn that the Gospel is for all and for everyone. It crosses all boundaries. She had multiple disadvantages: she was a woman in a world dominated by men; a Samaritan, and so from a nation considered unclean by the Jews. We don't know what led to her domestic situation, but it was certainly open to interpretation. And she was probably poor too if she was fetching her own water in the heat of the middle of the day (1). So, if the Gospel applies to her then it applies to the rest of us too, whatever our status.

And we could finish there. Job done. We can get on with the rest of the service and get home early.

In contrast

But let's *not* stop there. As someone once said, "it takes more than one ingredient to make a cake" – and this particular cake has a lot of ingredients! So, let's contrast this with the story in the chapter earlier.

Here we have a named man, Nicodemus. He was Jewish, a leader and a pillar of society. But he comes in the night, in the dark rather than the light, when no-one can see him. And at the end, who knows? Jesus is talking and then the story stops. We learn nothing about how Nicodemus is affected. He does crop-up later in John, obviously sympathetic but obviously a bit embarrassed too. Perhaps concerned what others might think. This encounter takes up half the number of verses and Jesus does most of the talking.

Maybe we're meant to see these two people as 'types'? Nicodemus as an example of those who are slow to believe and the Samaritan woman as one who is quick and decisive.

More about him than her

Our meeting takes place at Jacob's well. Water wells were like singles bars. Boy meets girl. Girl meets boy. Rachel and Jacob meet at a well. Rebecca was found for Isaac at a well. Zipporah and Moses meet at a well too (2). Readers or listeners of John will be thinking that this is a set up for a bit of romance.

Some commentators, including even a few modern-day ones, think the woman is flirting with Jesus, trying to seduce him, the latest in her long list (3).

And yes, "five husbands and one that you're not married to", *may* mean a morally questionable background... or perhaps she'd just been desperately unfortunate with the death of, or being divorced by, a string of men. Life was precarious, so we shouldn't just assume that she was immoral in some way. After all, Jesus shows no signs of condemning her, does he? He's just showing he has knowledge and insight. It's saying more about *him* than about her.

A symbol

Indeed, some see her personal circumstance as really a picture of the Samaritan nation as a whole. That here she was a symbol of *all* Samaritans. Back in 2 Kings, Assyria brought in peoples from five other nations into the Samaritan territory after they had defeated it (4). Samaria itself had metaphorically five 'husbands' because of the inter-marriage between all those nations. The 'unmarried one now' refers to the Roman occupation of the time.

So, with this more symbolic view, are we meant to see God now wooing Samaria to be part of the new Israel, to come back into the fold, rather than any personal chemistry between Jesus and the woman? Though you do sense a 'spark' don't you? If not romantic, then one of intellectual curiosity.

The knowledgeable one

Because of her questions, the woman has sometimes been portrayed as being a little slow on the uptake. But I think with different spectacles on we see a highly intelligent woman with knowledge of both Samaritan and Jewish theology. She knows her history too. She's respectful yet assertive. Whilst she

doesn't understand what "living water" is, quite honestly, which of us would? Jesus doesn't explain it, so she probes and questions. I don't think it's a sign of being slow. After all, "being born again" wasn't understood by Nicodemus in the chapter earlier yet we don't call *him* dim witted.

If you think of Jesus as a rabbi, then he paid her the highest compliment: he debated and discussed with her. He could have chosen not to engage but instead there was give and take. Cat and mouse.

The Enlightened One

In the Greek Orthodox Church, she's a saint - and they give her a name: Photine. It means 'the luminous one' or 'enlightened one'. They believe she carried on witnessing, moving her family to Carthage in what is now Tunisia. She was later imprisoned by Nero in Rome and after being tortured she was martyred there (5). So, she shared the fate of many of the disciples.

But back to the Gospel, Jesus says to her: "I AM". God said that to Moses at the burning bush after telling him to take his sandals off. He sent him off from a holy place with a message for his people. Photine went off with a message for her people too, from a place which was also rooted in history, Jacob's well (6).

When you think about it, Photine didn't just leave her water jar when she ran back to the city. She left Jesus too! Sat there on his own by the well. She felt so compelled to share the news that she left him there! Would we? Wouldn't we have rather stayed in case he wasn't there when we returned?

Come and see

And her testimony is effective. Although her faith was by no stretch of the imagination complete, just moments after meeting Jesus, she went out and drew people in. “Come and see” she says. And they do. How about us? Do we wait till we’ve gone on a training course? Got a qualification? Got a dog-collar? If we learn nothing else, it should be that we don’t have to know all the answers before inviting people to come and see.

Photine didn’t overstate her knowledge. She didn’t come out with a sophisticated creed of belief. If anything, she underplayed it. She already knew he was the Christ, the Messiah, but she turned it into a question. “Is he the Messiah?” She piqued their curiosity. Made them find out for themselves. Another lesson for us perhaps?

And I think there must have been something about her. Some change from the person they knew. A new light in her eyes perhaps, a radiance in her face, that brought people out at lunchtime, in the heat of the day, to go look for themselves.

Where did he stay?

He stayed 2 days. Not just Jesus mind, but all the disciples – perhaps the women that travelled with them were there too. Possibly a group of 20 visitors altogether, shared out at night amongst the homes in the village.

Where exactly did *Jesus* stay, I wonder? Isn’t it likely that he stopped at the house of Photine and her ‘partner’?

The peoples: “now we believe for ourselves” comment at the end is sometimes read as being condescending – but I think it rather expresses what we all aspire to. We don’t want a second-hand faith based on someone else’s experience. We want our own first-hand faith. And the villagers had now had the benefit of a 2-day residential course with Jesus!

Q&A?

When you consider this story, and others, much of what we read about what Jesus says is when he’s in conversation. He’s responding to questions or challenges or provocations. And Jesus improvises. He uses his immediate circumstance to illustrate his message. When he’s in the country he talks about sowing and fields. He’s sat at a well and so he talks about water.

There are not many times when Jesus preaches as such. There’s the Sermon on the Mount - but that’s more a collection of sayings rather than a sermon as we’d know it. So, should that be a model for us too? I wonder whether, instead of a sermon, this spot in our Sunday service should be more of a conversation? Should it be more interactive? A Q&A session? Would that put you off or would it make it more interesting?

What else was shared?

And a final thought. John places this meeting early on in Jesus ministry. How many more times did Jesus make the trip to and from Galilee and Jerusalem? How many other times did he stop by and see Photine again? Maybe he was a frequent visitor like he was with Mary and Martha? If so, what other

conversations did they have? In John's Gospel, Jesus told only Photine, the woman at the well, that he was the Messiah. What else did he reveal to her that he shared with no-one else? What else was said between the Light of the World and the Enlightened One?

“A man who told me everything I ever did.” And he loved her, and he loves us, despite that. Or maybe because of that. Just as we are. “Come and see”. **Amen**

1. Teresa D'Avila – Conceptions of the love of God
2. Genesis 24, 29 and Exodus 2
3. For example, Lyle Eslinger – The Wooing of the Woman at the Well
4. 2 Kings 17:24
5. https://orthodoxwiki.org/Photine_of_Samaria
6. Sychar is thought by some to be Schechem where Abraham first stopped in Canaan