

Lent 3 A February 24, 2008: Combined Parish Service

John 4: 5-42

There will have been times for most of us when we feel as if we have been used up by others. You give your best, but it is taken for granted, and you are later discarded. It may have been in the workplace, in a relationship, perhaps even in the church. You feel diminished as a person, and the memory of these experiences can eat away at your sense of personal worth. The pain of old wounds like these, and their scars can stay with you - in some cases - for the rest of your life.

The Woman of Samaria, whom Jesus met at Jacob's well, was like that. She had endured five, maybe six, encounters that were painful for her, and had taken to avoiding human company. Isolation was better than continuing to be hurt.

It is often assumed that this woman was a hardened sinner. This is a great pity, because it is much more likely, in fact, that the woman is the one who has been mistreated.

She has had five husbands. A key point here is to remember that in Jesus' day, men held all the rights to divorce. A man could divorce his wife on the smallest pretext, and to make a divorce effective, all the husband needed to do was to call in a male witness, and write out the dismissal notice.

Once divorced, unless she had independent means, a woman lost all status and value in the community. Usually, her own family was loathe to have her back and so her very survival became precarious. Now responsible for her own existence, her only options for employment were limited. In reality those options were restricted to finding work as a servant, marrying again very quickly, working as a prostitute.... or starving.

So... here is an important thing to register about this encounter at the well in Samaria: the woman was one of life's victims; she had been used by men and then discarded. Her status and dignity in the community had been torn.

Then one day, under the burning heat of the midday sun, unexpectedly she had an encounter of a different kind.

With your mind's eye, you can probably picture her at high noon, when all the sensible people would be indoors, or those out in the fields would be sheltering in the shade of brushwood booths which rural workers still erect today.

Picture her picking up the large water jar, slipping out of her dwelling in a little town where everybody knows everybody else, and scurrying out of the village, through the haze of heat, to Jacob's well. The other women would have been there in the cool of the early morning, chatting and laughing together. And they will be there again in the shade of evening, exchanging the gossip of the

day. But this lonely woman makes the journey alone, to avoid any scornful glances or barbed words. Even the midday heat was preferable to the stares and whispers behind hands.

As she arrives near the well of Jacob, she has no idea that she is coming to "the well of salvation." You can almost see her surprise when she finds a stranger sitting there. Perhaps she stopped, a few metres short of the well, not sure what do. Then it Jesus who takes the initiative.

Jesus neither ignores her nor avoids her, like others would have; instead he does something very unexpected: He asks her for help. He asks her to give him a drink. Bruce Prewer writes: "The diminished person is asked to give help to the one who we believe to have been the most complete human being who ever lived."

It is a question that invites us to reflect for a moment on the potential for ministry among those whom society treats as casualties, or the ignored nobodies. We often think in terms of "what can we do for them?" But Jesus put himself beside people, not above them. Jesus was ready to allow her to help him.

Having given her some dignity, Jesus is able to offer her something more: the riddle of the living water.

"If you could understand who it is who is talking with you, you would ask me for a drink of living water, welling up with abundant life."

The woman responds:

"How? You have no bucket or pitcher. This well is deep."

Jesus answers by affirming that what he has to offer will be like a spring of clear water bubbling up from her heart with eternal life. The woman whose own heart feels shrunken and dry cries out: "Sir, please give to me that water."

After a discussion about the number of her husbands and where is the proper place for worship (harking to an age old dispute between Jews and Samaritans) the conversation comes around to who Jesus is. Confused by Jesus' answer about the true worshippers worshipping in spirit and truth she tells him she believes that God will one day send a Messiah who will make all things plain.

"I know that the Messiah is coming", she says. "When he comes, he will explain all things."

We may imagine that Jesus used "a gentle but firm voice" (Prewer) in responding:

"I am he, the one who is speaking to you"

At this point the disciples returned from the village. They were surprised to see Jesus speaking with such a woman. They could understand that God loved reputable people, but how could Jesus keep company with the disreputable: a Samaritan, a woman, and the village sinner? We are glad (aren't we) that God's open arms have included us. But we are also all capable of getting uncomfortable when those same open arms include people we would rather avoid.

We are now told about the woman's response to Jesus' words. The story concludes with the woman going back into her town and witnessing to the people about Jesus, the Messiah. This scorned woman, now had the confidence to go back and share her good news with the people who had despised her. At the very least she has found self-respect; but more - she has found the living water that is the grace of God.

And her new dignity evidently impressed many in the Samaritan village. They invited this Jesus, and his disciples, to share their Samaritan hospitality, and they stayed for a few days. Remarkably, we read that many people there put their trust in Jesus as a result of the woman's testimony.

They also came to experience an encounter with the saving love of God in Jesus Christ, where old ways of thinking and acting are cast aside, and all things become new.

I am told that the further to the west you travel you will find that cattle and sheep stations no longer use fences to keep their stock from running away. Instead, there are only wells of water. They do not want to stray because the water keeps them alive; they cannot be without it, so they keep coming back. No fences are needed.

Our churches are to be like a well from which no one will want to stray. And if people do, it is not their fault but ours. Our worship, our fellowship, our care; they should all make us a place where Jesus may be found, and his living water experienced - the healing, refreshing grace of God's love.

If people come to our congregations and receive from them a renewed and refreshed spirit, then we can give thanks to God that we are playing a part in the creation of a more hopeful world.

Jesus said to her: "...those who drink of the water that I will give to them will never be thirsty...[it] will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life." The woman said to him, "Sir, give to me this water..."