

27th March 2011 “The Samaritan woman at the well” Lent 3 - DT

John 4: 5-42 Theme: “God’s holy watering place”

vs 14 “..Indeed the water I give .. will become ..
a spring of water welling up to eternal life.”

Introduction

What an amazing passage we have today with so many possibilities for discussion. We could talk about any of the following:

- Jesus’ positive attitude to women
- Jesus’ inclusion of those on the edges of society
- Jesus’ use of the image of water relating to life
- Jesus’ ability to engage with people
- who Jesus really is?!
- the imagery of food and the relationship to spiritual harvest and evangelism
- the change in people’s lives as they encounter Jesus
- witnessing to others about what we have experienced in our faith journeying

This passage could indeed be preached upon for a ‘month of Sundays’ so to speak because of the content. However you’ll be pleased that I’m not going to do that today!

In reading around the passage I came across the term I’ve already used from Bruce Prewer in a prayer earlier in the service, “God’s holy watering place”. I guess I’d like to change it a little to “God’s holy watering hole” and Prewer uses this image to speak of the gathered congregation.

However, the imagery has a wonderful ‘Australian-ness’ about it. Wherever you find spiritual nurture, encouragement and hope there is “God’s watering hole” found in people, situations and churches.

In the bush, in harsh times, you see the well worn cattle tracks leading to the bore, where the windmill has pumped the artesian water to the surface and provides the possibility of life to not only the cattle but also to the animals of the bush. These bores are often extremely noisy as the cockies, budgies, finches come in for a drink alongside the cattle, the kangaroos and the emus with the occasional dingo slinking about. It is a place of hope and life not unlike the wells of Jesus’ day where water was drawn to sustain life.

Quite a wonderful image to put into a spiritual/theological setting.

Are there any of these type of places that you have experienced either in a physical or a spiritual way? (possibly shared discussion!)

Middle

There are four things that I would like us to take note of from this passage today.

1. Notice that Jesus initiates conversation

Here at the well, in the midday sun, the Samaritan woman comes to the well. Jesus' disciples have gone off to buy food and we presume that Jesus is waiting, in the shade, for them to return. Jesus probably didn't need to initiate conversation but he did. Due to the arrival time this woman was on the fringe of society – generally the respectable women drew water in the cool of the morning or evening and usually in groups. Here, this Samaritan woman was by herself and at a time when others were not about. Jesus breaks the social rules to talk to her as he knew she was a Samaritan, likely of low reputation and not accepted by most. Yet Jesus steps across these social barriers and enters in to conversation. Both she and later the returning disciples are shocked by this interchange.

If Jesus were here today, what social norms would he have to cross to talk with us? An interesting question! Cross cultural, language barriers (English might not be an option), religious orientation, education, tradesperson versus academic and so on.

How would Jesus initiate a conversation with us and would we allow him to have a conversation with us? Certainly the woman at Jacob's well wasn't too sure about Jesus talking to her.

2. Notice that it is Jesus who is thirsty

It is Jesus who is thirsty and probably had no utensil to drink from. Hence he is seeking the help of another. It also gives the Samaritan woman the opportunity to recognize the face of Christ in a stranger.

There is something beautifully simple in the staging of this scene. On the one hand the woman has the means to meet Jesus' actual thirst and on the other hand Jesus has the means to meet the spiritual thirst of the Samaritan woman. The deeper metaphorical conversation that follows makes no sense until we really take this in. Can a little thing like a cup of cool water, offered in love, be the beginning of a salvation journey? Yes; and we will never know until we meet the stranger, and tend to the human need first.

3. Notice the order of recognition: Prophet, then Messiah

Jesus shares with the Samaritan woman some aspects of her life. Whether these were common knowledge or Jesus had divine insight at this time is unclear but the woman was impressed and called Jesus a prophet. However, Jesus goes on to share with her about spiritual matters and true worship and the truth. Samaritans only had the Pentateuch as their Bible (the first 5 books of the Hebrew Scripture).

They did not accept much of the other Jewish Scriptures and Jesus reminds her (and other readers of these words later) that they were missing out on the promised

Messiah because they did not accept wider revelation of God's word. In a sense, part of the 'water of life' was being excluded from their knowledge and hence their understanding as Samaritans. True worship is initially from the Jews but now, in Christ Jesus, has been widened to all who 'worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshippers the Father seeks'. Vs 23b

4. Notice what is said as well as not said

When the woman comes to the startling recognition that she has been talking to the Messiah, she leaves her water jar, and Jesus, and runs to the village with the news "Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done!" Notice the unfinished sentence, especially knowing the woman's history: "Come and see a man who told me everything I ever did ... and who still loves me anyway!" She doesn't say these last six words but they are implicit in her joy as she shares with others. She, like us, has a long list of sins. Mostly, we don't want to shout them out, but we recognise that our Christ is all too aware of who we are and what we are and yet still loves us – that was the liberating aspect for the Samaritan woman. She knew she was accepted, forgiven and had encountered the Messiah and she wanted to share that adventure with others – fantastic

Conclusion

What do we take from this story for ourselves and our church community? Our church should be a 'holy watering hole' where all are accepted, where we know God's forgiving love and share the joy of knowing Jesus as Messiah.

We are called to be refreshed in this season of Lent as we share in worship, in our Bible Study groups and in our preparations for Easter.

Let me finish with Bruce Prewer's "This well is deep".

"Rising water, springing from great depths, stored up long ago when the stars first sang together for joy.

Living water, like a cup of celebration, full and running over all the days of our life.

Refreshing water, mysteriously satisfying so that our youth is renewed like soaring eagles.

Cleansing water, washing deep down where fingers cannot reach, making all things new.

Surprising water, breaking through the earth in rocky places wherever that man Jesus goes.

Redeeming water, paid in full by One who by cross and tomb has brought us his baptism. Amen