

2CH Sunday at 7.30

Talks from the NSW Council of Churches

The woman at the well

Presented by Chris Dixon

If we go back to the Sydney Olympics in the year 2000, most of us can recall a time when Sydney was really buzzing. There was a terrific feeling of camaraderie as lots of people pitched in to help as volunteers. The Olympics gave us an opportunity to revel in meeting one of our most basic human needs, and that is the need for community and friendship. Sadly, we don't always manage to find a meaningful sense of community, and many people in our society feel alienated and lonely. We've all experienced loneliness at some time in our lives and this morning I want to encourage you with a marvellous story Jesus told about overcoming loneliness and alienation. It's found in John 4: 1-42.

True community is found right at the beginning of the Bible, in the book of Genesis. There we read in Genesis 1: 26 that God has created us in his image and likeness. What does that really mean? Well, Christians believe in a God who exists in relationship and always has. The Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit is one, but the persons exist in loving communion with one another. We are made for harmonious relationships that should follow the pattern of the loving fellowship of the three persons of our Trinitarian God, but the reality in our world today is often very different. Because of our tendency to ignore God and go it alone, all of our relationships, even the best of them, suffer from our failure to love as God loves: freely, generously and unconditionally.

One of the most important things Jesus did was to establish a new community based on his teaching about God's love for the world. He stressed the need for a change of heart from love of self to love of God and our neighbours. In Ch 4 of his gospel, John tells a story about a Samaritan woman who had that change of heart and joined the community of believers, becoming one of the first evangelists. Just before this meeting at the well, Jesus had spent time with Nicodemus, an important person in the Jewish hierarchy. Nicodemus, with all his background knowledge about religion, didn't understand what Jesus was saying about new life. John then records an encounter Jesus had with a person who was a great contrast to Nicodemus, a woman who stood for a group that was wholeheartedly despised by orthodox Judaism.

It's a story that gives us all hope because it shows Jesus' interest in those who were marginalized in the first century world and we can all identify with that. You may have felt marginalized at some time or another in your life. Made to feel inadequate or unworthy, perhaps separated by grief, or illness. If being a fringe person has been your experience, take heart. Here we have a marvellous picture of God in action in the person of his Son Jesus Christ, offering new life which is anchored in God himself, rather than in our own frailty. Ch 4 is unique among the gospels in its picture of the compassion and patience of Jesus. Not only does he spend time with a woman who amounted to very little in her own community, he ministers to her people, the Samaritans, who were regarded as outcasts by the Jews. His own disciples are amazed at his poor judgment in breaking the conventions of his day to tell people about God's love.

There are four major players in this story: Jesus, the Samaritan woman, the disciples, and the Samaritan community. John uses their interaction to highlight three important ideas that contribute to the special community that Jesus called into existence, the community we call the church.

First, in Ch 4 vv 6-18, John tells us that Jesus gives the gift of living water; second, in vv 27-42 we learn what Jesus teaches about the nature of true worship; and third, in vv. 27-42 we see Jesus' willingness to move outside the usual limitations of race, gender and religion, to bring people into the fellowship of his kingdom.

In Act One of this drama, in the midday heat Jesus stops for refreshments at Jacob's well and asks a Samaritan woman for a drink. This was a most unusual thing for a Jewish man to do. The Samaritan woman represents three oppressed groups in the first century, that Jews traditionally despised. First, she was a woman, not a good prospect in the first century, second, she was a Samaritan, and therefore a foreigner as far as the Jews were concerned; and third, she was the wrong religion, because the Samaritans did not believe in all the books of the Old Testament. To top it all off in the undesirability stakes, she was probably a prostitute, because only the outcast came for water in the heat of the midday sun. She was the most unlikely candidate for a conversation with the Son of God.

His request for a drink would have been a real shock to this woman, because Samaritan women were regarded as permanently unclean to Jews, so anything she touched would be unclean. It's easy to dismiss people because they're different-perhaps that's happened to you, but it's not the way Jesus treated people. Jesus isn't bothered with age-old discriminations and engages her in conversation about the difference between the water in Jacob's well and his living water of eternal life.

The woman misunderstands Jesus, and thinks Jesus is telling her that he can get her spring water, flowing water, but she knows this is impossible from a well. However, Jesus is talking about the gift of the Holy Spirit-that's his living water and it's the real thing because it never runs out and brings eternal life. The water from Jacob's well is life giving but it's only a temporary thing for now, whereas Jesus is offering her an eternal, life-giving, spiritual gift of God's grace. Jesus' living water meets our deepest needs in a way that no ordinary teaching can. We are meant to live in communities based on God's love, but sadly, in our culture there are many lifestyles on offer that entice people away from the truth about God and the living water of the Holy Spirit.

In vv 17 and 18, Jesus brings up the dissatisfactions in the Samaritan woman's life that have driven her from one man to another. He knows that her past is very fractured, and her present life unfulfilled – perhaps that's your story too. Thankfully, her personal tragedies and disappointments with the way life has turned out don't shock Jesus. He knows all about human frailty and the disasters which can strike without warning. Who knows why this woman had five husbands? Which of us hasn't experienced heartbreak or loss or made a disastrous choice at some point in our lives? It's only when we recognize how impossible it is to find wholeness on our terms that we become open to the possibility of God and our need to find security in him. The Samaritan woman recognises Jesus' prophetic insight into the mess that her life is, and perhaps in an attempt to change the subject, asks him an important religious question for the Samaritans. Where is the right place to worship God: Jerusalem or Mt Gerazim?

Her question gives Jesus an opportunity to help her understand the meaning of true worship of God. He tells her that true worship of God isn't tied to a place or a building or a ritual. It's neither Jerusalem nor Mt Gerazim. "True worshippers" says Jesus in v. 23, "will worship the Father in spirit and truth." The spirit is the Holy Spirit of God who reveals the truth that Jesus is the Son of God sent into the world to bring new life to the whole creation. When Jesus tells her that he is the Messiah in v. 26, the Samaritan woman grasps it immediately. Satisfied with his answer, she goes off to tell her fellow Samaritans the good news.

In Act Two of this story, in v. 27, the disciples arrive, and they're amazed to see Jesus talking to the Samaritan woman. As far as they're concerned, all the old discriminations still apply. They haven't understood that Jesus' inclusive kingdom knows nothing of gender, race, or religious discrimination when people worship God in spirit and truth. Everyone is welcome and loved equally by God.

When the disciples offer Jesus some food, he takes the opportunity to give them some teaching about what really sustains him. The food that nourishes Jesus' heart is not the bread and butter variety, although that's important. The real spiritual food, soul food if you like, is for him to do the will of his Father. In Jesus' case, obedience meant sacrificial love to the point of death on the cross to remedy our constant pursuit of false loves. Sacrificial, Christ-like love is the pattern for our lives if we want to worship God in spirit and truth and live in a community based on love.

In Act Three of the drama, in vv 31-38, Jesus is portrayed as the one sent from God to all nations, not just to the Jews. He reminds the disciples about the harvest of people already saved through his teaching, and now there is to be a harvest among the Samaritans. The four month gap usually seen between planting and harvesting is no more. The Samaritan woman heard him speak and believed him immediately. Many other Samaritans believed her testimony and came back to see the prophet for themselves. They too believed Jesus' teaching and acted on it.

This story is important because it shows that Jesus intends his message of hope and reconciliation to reach the world. There is to be no discrimination in the new Christ community. Men, women, Jews, Gentiles, slaves, free are all one in Jesus Christ as Paul tells us in Galatians 3:28. Jesus' kingdom is not one that discriminates against women, or foreigners, or people of other religious backgrounds, or people with baggage: which of us hasn't got baggage? It's a kingdom that starts with God's love for people with baggage who accept his offer of living water and trust him for his truthfulness. When we turn away from the self-destructive attitudes and activities that lead nowhere, and turn around to face and embrace the love of God as seen in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, we tap into the living water that renews our lives. It is living water that only flows into the hearts of humble and repentant people like the Samaritan woman, who know that their deep need for healing. Jesus Christ longs to bring you into his community of love. He knows you as no other.

Those who take up his offer of living water will one day see God face to face in heaven, which as Jonathan Edwards said, is a world of love. In this world of love we will really understand what community is all about. It will be one where "love is always mutual" where God's love for his people and their love for God, ensures "a sweet and perfect harmony in the heavenly society." I'm sure we'll see the Samaritan woman there.

A third century commentator Ephraim the Syrian gives a lovely summary of Jesus' encounter with the woman at the well. I pray that this is your experience of encountering Jesus.

Ephraim said "Jesus came to the well as a hunter...He threw a grain before one pigeon that he might capture the whole flock...At the beginning of the conversation he did not make himself known to her, so first she caught sight of a thirsty man, then a Jew, then a Rabbi, afterwards a prophet, last of all the Messiah. She tried to get the better of the thirsty man, she showed her dislike of the Jew, she heckled the Rabbi, she was swept off her feet by the prophet, and she adored the Christ."