

Faith and Doubt

The Samaritan Woman

Text: The Gospel of John 4: 1-41

Jesus had been travelling within Judea, when he travelled into Samaria. The enmity between the Jews and the Samaritans was on going. Central to the enmity was a dispute relating to the cultic shrine of the Samaritans and the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem. The shrine was destroyed by Jewish soldiers in 128 BC. The encounter between Jesus and the woman from Sychar in Samaria occurs while the dispute was still on going. This encounter is recorded only in John's Gospel.

Who was the Samaritan woman?

She is identified by her ethnic origins and has no name. She is the central figure in the encounter. Her conversation with Jesus crosses social, cultural and religious boundaries. Her marginalisation within her own community resulted from her marital status. She was believed to have had five husbands. Being in a minority on all fronts: race, gender, sexuality and religion, Jesus' initial offer of the water of life may have prompted her decision to believe in him. Her ability to engage in a long dialogue, to ask insightful questions and finally to be the witness who brought her community to faith in Jesus places her as an equal among the disciples and Mary Magdalene

Retelling the encounter between Jesus and the Samaritan woman. What follows is a retelling based on the biblical narrative. It is by reading into silences around events and the people in the text that this imagined creative reflection is written.

The Samaritan woman reflects: *I checked the water jars. They needed re-filling so I picked up an empty jar and left for the well. The noon day sun was scorching but I was used to this daily trek. As Jacob's Well came into sight I stopped. A stranger was seated by the well. I looked around and there was no one else in sight. I wondered if I should retreat and come back later. Would the man attack me? It was a long way back and I would need to walk back again. I decided to take a chance and walked slowly towards the well even though I was full of doubts.*

I froze when the man spoke to me and asked for a drink of water. As I looked closer I realised that he was a Jew and that he shouldn't have been asking me – a Samaritan

woman - for a drink. It was not acceptable to both our cultures. I picked up courage and asked him how he expected to draw water when he didn't have a bucket. My mind was racing with questions and suspicions. He replied that I didn't know what God wanted to give me. That I didn't know who he was and that he could give me the water that gives life.

I was curious. I needed to know what he was talking about. So I questioned him again. How could he possibly draw life giving water from this well which we had used for years. It was the well that our ancestor Jacob had dug for everyone to use. I couldn't resist asking if he thought that he was greater than Jacob! He didn't answer my question. Instead he went on about the living water that he could give me that would never make me thirsty again. That this water would give me life that was eternal. I decided that I should ask for this water so that I wouldn't need to walk to the well everyday.

I was embarrassed when he replied by asking me to go and bring my husband. I looked away and mumbled that I didn't have a husband. I was amazed when he responded that he knew that I had five husbands and that the man I was living with now was not my husband. How did he know this, I thought. I had to change the subject because I didn't want him to probe deeper into my personal life. So I talked about how my ancestors had worshipped at Mount Gerizim which we could see from where we stood, and didn't the Jews worship in Jerusalem?

Again he didn't answer my question. Instead he continued to share with me things I had never heard of before. He talked of God as Father and about the Spirit that would guide true worshippers. I was mesmerized. I began to think that perhaps this man was the Messiah, the one who would be called the Christ. His next words would stay with me forever. He said "I am the one and I am speaking to you now".

Our conversation was interrupted when a few of his followers returned. They looked suspiciously at both of us. They must have had doubts as to why I was alone with a man. I left my jar at the well and ran. I was excited and decided to share my encounter with anyone in my town who would listen. I was so happy when I persuaded many of them to come back with me to meet the man who was the Messiah.

When we returned we saw him in deep conversation with the men who had brought him food. We joined them and listened to what he was saying. Many of the towns people believed him. Some invited him to stay longer. He did. He stayed two days in the town. Many more Samaritan people believed in him. Why was I not surprised when some said to me that they had faith in Jesus, not because of what I had said but

because they had heard him for themselves. It made me happy when I heard some of them refer to Jesus as the Saviour of the World.

And to think that all this happened because I went to Jacob's Well for water!

PAUSE and reflect.

The Samaritan woman didn't hesitate to ask hard questions. Do we feel intimidated by conversations on theology and Bible texts that we may not understand?

What intentions colour our conversations with those who don't belong to a church community or who live in the 'real' world?

REFLECTIONS:

Jesus initiated the conversation with the Gentile woman. As their conversation developed he offered her 'living water' (4:10). His comments relating to her sexual identity – a woman with no husband and multiple relationships – did not deter him. That she was considered to be ethically impure was not an issue. Jesus continues to reveal his true identity to her.

It is the longest conversation with a woman recorded in the Gospels. Jesus reveals that "the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth"(4:23). "God is spirit and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth," The woman replies: "I know that Messiah is coming."(4:25). Jesus responds "I am he. The one who is speaking to you."

Jesus crossed boundaries between him and the Samaritan woman. She believed that he was the Messiah and ran to witness to the news to the people in Sychar. The Samaritan woman moved out of her comfort zone to witness to Jesus. She moved from doubt, to questioning, to faith.

Is it easy to talk about faith today?

Is it necessary for us to step outside our comfort zones to bridge the boundaries that separate church and secular society?

Living God,
fill my life with 'living water' when I am confused and fearful.