

Lent 3 St Marylebone 2017 11 am

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Today, Jacob's well lies within the complex of an Eastern Orthodox monastery named after St Photini in the West Bank city of Nablus.

In Jesus' day, the well would, perhaps, have been the only reliable supply of water for the people of the town of Sychar and, as such, it would have made a natural resting place for travellers passing through the area.

The well would have been part of the everyday routine for the women and children whose task it was to draw water to meet the basic needs of people and animals.

The woman whom Jesus meets at the well-head probably came to draw water from the well every day, but the day on which she met Jesus would certainly not be like every other back-breaking day of her life.

For centuries, Jews had given Samaria – and Samaritans - a very wide berth. The Samaritans had ignored God's injunction not to mix with other tribes and peoples and they looked to their Temple on Mount Samaria rather than the one in Jerusalem.

But Jesus and his disciples ignore the centuries-old hostility between the Jews and the Samaritans and they stop in the village to rest and buy food.

The conversation which takes place between Jesus and the unamend woman is the longest conversation between Jesus and another person recorded anywhere in the Gospels.

At first, the woman is shocked by Jesus' request for a drink and she points out to him that Jews simply do not share anything with Samaritans, certainly not eating utensils and dishes, which is what the Greek word, *sugchraomai*, implies.

A slightly out-of-the-ordinary conversation about having a drink and racial difference, however, soon turns into a rather esoteric discussion about 'living water' and, just as Nicodemus had failed to see the spiritual meaning of being "born again", so the woman at the well fails to see the spiritual significance of Jesus' offer of "living water".

Jesus knows that it is the woman, and not he, who is the thirsty one – thirsty for what will quench her spiritual longing, and he describes to her the living water which he alone can provide as, a spring of gushing water,

eternally flowing from deep within the person who will receive his gift.

John the Evangelist could have ended the conversation right there, but he goes on to record that Jesus suddenly changes the subject and asks the woman to call her husband.

Honestly, she says that she has no husband.

Indeed, Jesus points out that he knows that she has had five husbandsⁱ and that the man she is now living with is not one of them, although in saying this to her, Jesus seems to imply no criticism and he does not tell her to repent of any sin, nor even to “sin no more”.

Getting the hang of this rather strange Jewish visitor, who might be just another slightly off-track wandering prophet, the woman asks Jesus a theological question about true worship.

Jesus gives her a very straight-forward reply and explains that God is looking for true worshippers, and that genuinely spiritual worship is not tied to any particular place, certainly not Mount Samaria nor even the Jews' Mount Zion.

When the woman reveals that she knows that the Messiah is coming, Jesus responds by telling her plainly that he is the Messiah: *egō eimi*, he says in Greek, “I am he”!

Immediately, the woman leaves her water jar at the well and rushes off into the nearby town. She tells everyone who will listen to her about Jesus, and, John tells us, many of the villagers come to believe in Jesus because of what she says.

It is no coincidence that John places the story of Jesus’ encounter with the Samaritan womanⁱⁱ immediately after Jesus’ encounter with Nicodemusⁱⁱⁱ.

Nicodemus was a well-educated Jewish man; a Pharisee and a member of the Jewish ruling council; he was a “teacher of Israel”; a man of prestige and power with had status and position in society.

In contrast, the woman to whom Jesus reveals his true identity, was a despised Samaritan; her family connections were certainly a bit complicated if not downright suspect; she is unnamed, obscure and vulnerable, yet, unlike Nicodemus, who meets Jesus under the cover of darkness, she meets him in broad daylight and in stark contrast to Nicodemus, who slinks off into the night after his meeting with Jesus, she puts

her faith and trust in Jesus immediately, rushing off into town to tell everyone she can find about the Messiah.

John seems to say, that Jesus treats everyone alike: the rich and powerful; those who have a name with which to reckon, and the nameless, the vulnerable, the dodgy and the dubious who live on the margins of society.

Indeed, John might even be saying through his telling of the contrasting stories of Nicodemus and the nameless woman at the well, that it is those without status, without learning, without power or influence; those with untidy and far from well-ordered lives, who might just be the people who are more likely to have eyes that see and ears that hear; the ones who might just be first in the Kingdom of Heaven^{iv}.

Oh, what about St Photini^v?

Well, she who is nameless in the gospels, in the Eastern Orthodox tradition is described as “equal to the apostles” because of her evangelizing work. She is regarded as the first person, other than Jesus, to proclaim the gospel – even before Mary Magdalene, and Photini, the “enlightened one” is the name that she took when Jesus baptised her in the waters of the well from which he had come to drink. Amen.

ⁱ The five husbands might well be a metaphor for the five peoples brought by the Assyrian king to settle in Samaria from Babylon, Cuthah, Avva, Hamath and Sepharvaim

ⁱⁱ John 4

ⁱⁱⁱ John 3

^{iv} Matthew 20.16 & Luke 13.30

^v the Samaritan woman is She is believed to have continued her evangelizing work in Carthage, but was later tortured and martyred by Nero. The Eastern Orthodox church claims her baptismal name is Photina, or Photini, meaning “enlightened one”.