

How do we react when things surprise us, or unsettle us?

I have been really enjoying our Lent study this year, and the challenge of rethinking Gospel stories in an Australian context. It has pushed me to think again about assumptions I bring to the stories of Jesus we read and hear – and how that impacts on the way we live.

It has for me encouraged a bigger reflective practice. What assumptions do I bring to the table about myself and others? What thoughts and behaviours do I hold onto which limit me from seeing or experiencing the fullness of a situation, or a relationship with someone else or even from embracing the fullness of God.

Today we hear I think one of the most powerful stories in John's Gospel. It is a story which carries lots of obvious and hidden meaning. To understand it more fully, it is helpful to look at it in context of its location in the Gospel, and also in the social, political, and theological context of Jesus ministry.

Last week, we were introduced to Nicodemus who comes to Jesus by night and lasts all of nine verses in his conversation with Jesus before fading into the night from whence he came. This week we jump a little further to where John narrates another character's encounter with Jesus, the Samaritan woman at the well. The contrast between Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman is striking. Given these stories appear so close together in the Gospel we can assume John wants us to notice this contrast in all its detail. Nicodemus is a Pharisee, an insider, a leader of the Jews. He is a man, his name is recorded, but he comes to Jesus by night. The character to whom we are introduced in this week's text is a Samaritan, a religious and political outsider. She is a woman, she is not named, but she meets Jesus at noon, in full daylight. And the contrast between their conversations with Jesus is even more extraordinary. Whereas Nicodemus is unable to move beyond the confines of his religious system, the Samaritan moves outside of her religious expectations and engages Jesus in theological debate (4:20).<sup>1</sup>

The timing of the conversation is also significant. The middle of the day is never a time 'to come and draw water' unless you are travelling and happen to arrive at that time as Jesus did. The Samaritan woman has a past, and her social status means she is avoiding coming to the well when others might challenge her or even take advantage of her.

What is interesting is that while the time tells us a lot both about the woman and Jesus, something else is happening here which is quite powerful and unusual – especially in contrast with the story of Nicodemus last week, where Jesus is speaking with a total insider – someone who belongs to the community and is included. This week the encounter is a conversation with a total outsider – someone who is not seen or heard by her own community, let alone in conversation with an itinerant preacher.

But we need to be careful, this conversation is not as simple as it first appears. It can be easy to impose a simple interpretation on this text declaring that it is about how Jesus 'includes in' this outsider. But this is a two-way conversation. This is as much about the woman engaging in conversation with Jesus, as it is about Jesus engaging in conversation with her. The church, along with many other powerful people or associations, to often uses the 'outsider' card when they really have the power, and we need to be careful in our contextual reasoning not to read things in which help our argument to the exclusion of others.

The challenge is that of course this story is about inclusion, but inclusion can mean different things, to different people - in different contexts.

Karoline Lewis, a theologian I really enjoy points out that the Samaritan woman at the well is not a passive recipient of Jesus' offer. She immediately recognizes the societal barriers and boundaries that keep her in her place (4:9) but at the same time

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=44](https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=44)

challenges Jesus' authority over and against the ancestors of the faith (4:12). Like Nicodemus, she first interprets Jesus' words on a literal level, (*how can you draw water you have no bucket*) but she is able to ask for what Jesus has to offer rather than question the possibility (4:15). She is not certain that Jesus is the Christ, but she does not let that stop her from leaving behind her water jar, going into the city, and inviting the people to their own encounter with Jesus. She demonstrates what can happen when we engage in conversation and questions about our faith. The woman at the well shows us that faith is about dialogue, about growth and change. It is not about having all the answers<sup>2</sup>.

I found this interpretation really helpful to the questions I have been exploring during Lent. Sometimes we think we know where things are going to go, we think we know the answers, we have expectations about how things will play out – but often we are wrong and we need to be open to engaging with what is in front of us, and not exhausting ourselves with the expectations or constructs we have put in place which limit this dialogue. It is this openness that brings us living water.

The Samaritan woman responds to Jesus in such a way that leads Jesus to reveal his true identity to her, and in doing so, her own identity is revealed and evolves. We learn from the Samaritan woman that in our own encounter with Jesus, not only are we changed, but that which God will reveal to us will change as well. It will bring life giving water.

The point of our journey through Lent is that we are creating spaces, allowing spaces hopefully for dialogue, but also spaces where we allow God to reveal new insights to us, which in turn allows our own identity to evolve. A space where the living water renews and refreshes us.

As we get to the midpoint of our Lenten journey, what conversation, what evolution are we open to experiencing? Are we willing to allow ourselves to be changed? Are we even open and willing to allow ourselves to be refreshed?

We are living in very strange and difficult times. Times that are very uncertain. It can be hard to know how to respond to all the pain in the world, and even harder at times to know how to pray into our concerns. But like Jesus and the Samaritan woman we can be held in conversation. We can be open to learning more about ourselves and each other. We can transform each other's lives by noticing each other, by being open to asking the question, and even more importantly taking time to listen to each other's answers. We can sit by the well and be surprised by the water we are offered.

The hope we can take from the readings today is that faith sustains us and is imbedded in conversation and community. God is leading us to grow; but often this

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requires us to start by letting go of our own imbedded assumptions and being open to owning the truths about ourselves which our conversation with God reveals. To be open to who we might meet, who invite us to think in new and different ways.

But even more than this, what God offers is refreshment – living water – prayer and hope that sustains life. Like those who thirsted in the desert with Moses; like the women and Jesus at the well; God offers water – that which refreshes and sustains us every day of our life – especially at times when uncertainty surrounds us. And it is this living water which invites us to pray. Amen.