

JOHN 4:4-42  
LIVING WATER?

People who don't fit in! Is that you? Are we people who don't fit into the culture or the society of Scotland? Do you think that you don't fit in? Do you feel that the views that you hold are out of step with what 'most people' think? Are your priorities in life different from those of most of your friends, your family even, or your neighbours? It is a hard place to be, on the edge! We live in a society that seems to be increasingly intolerant of difference; we need to conform to the accepted view or else we are outcast; that is too strong, but you get the idea. Do you ever feel that you don't fit into the Church? I've been in places in the Church where I have felt that I don't fit, where, because I might ask an awkward question, I'm pushed to the edge of the group. How good are we at accepting people who don't fit in to our idea of a Christian? People who're not sure of the 'right answers' to theological questions; people who're not sure when to stand up and when to sit in Church; people whose lives are not straightforward, who don't conform to some idea of the 'normal life'; people who somehow are on the edge of the group and are not sure what else they need to do to belong?

I'm going to introduce you to someone who doesn't fit in for all sorts of reasons. First of all, she is a woman and in her culture that makes her a very clear second class citizen, and she's illiterate. She comes from a different background, not from the right place or people. She may well be some kind of outcast in her village, someone that no-one speaks to unless they really are forced to! She has made a mess of her life in one way or another and her domestic arrangements are 'unconventional', shall we say. She is confused about some of the important issues in life, and yet she has a deep sense of need to get all of this 'sorted out'. What would we do with her when she comes to our Sunday service? In some ways, she already does, though in our case 'she' is not one person but lots of us! How do we deal with the person on the edge? How will Jesus deal with her?

"Will the real Jesus please stand up?" This is the title that we've given to this little series of sermons in John's gospel. John wrote his gospel so that people would learn to believe some things about Jesus, that He is Son of God, the Messiah. John tells these stories so that we might read them and encounter the real Jesus and, believing in Him, might transform our lives. 'Life' is the gift that Jesus came to bring, 'the life of the age to come' when God is King, life breaking in to our world now so that we might know something of the blessing of God on our lives. We've seen Jesus transform water into wine; we've seen Him angry because the temple is being misused; last week, we heard Him introduce Nicodemus to the idea of new life; 'Nicodemus, you need a new heart!' and 3 years later, Nicodemus stands up to profess his loyalty to Jesus in the most public way.

Today, Jesus is the man of grace! This is the best word that I can use to describe this encounter. There are all sorts of reasons why this encounter should never take place and why Jesus should walk away, but these are the same reasons why Jesus meets this woman and brings her close to the kingdom of God. He is grace personified! Grace is defined as "God's love to people who are not worthy of it" (James Philip) and by all the usual measures, here is a woman who fits that bill perfectly. Yet, Jesus speaks to her; He listens to her; He offers her the answer to her prayers; He changes her community by her witness. If ever there was an encounter in the gospels to speak to our society and to show Jesus to people in need, this is it! Here is someone who changes broken lives and it is all by grace!

They meet at the well. There is something about that! On the South side of Glasgow, there is a place called "The Well" and in that multi-cultural community it is a place

where people can come to meet with Christians who will listen to them and help them deal with the problems of life. It is inspired by this encounter at the well outside the village of Sychar in Samaria. There are lots of well-encounters in the Bible: it is the community meeting place; today's school gate, post office, farmers' market, the place where people met to chew the fat while they are waiting for their turn to draw water. It is midday and Jesus sits down, tired from His morning's journey and the disciples go into the village to buy food. The woman comes to the well at midday: this suggests something of an outcast, because people didn't go to the well at the hottest part of the day; this is something to do in the morning and the evening; did she come at noon because she wanted to avoid conversation?

*"Will you..." (John 4:7)* It is a very simple request, but it shot through so many taboos and prejudices! There are two big taboos: first of all, a Jew speaks to a Samaritan – they are sworn enemies. This goes back deep into the history of Israel, to a time when the Jews were taken away into exile, 700 years before, and the Assyrian king who took them away, resettled part of the land of Israel with people from other places; they became a people of mixed race and the Jews hated them for their mixed race and for their occupation of their land. Secondly, a man speaks to a woman – this was not meant to happen in public, ever! The woman very much the second class citizen and it was forbidden for men and women to converse in public. Jesus says *"Will you..." (John 4:7)* He's thirsty; it is a quite natural request; she's about to draw water and He's thirsty! It takes her aback! We'll come back to the water and the well later!

*"Go call..." (John 4:16ff)* Her life is not straightforward and conventional; that is something of an understatement! I came across a church in the USA called "The Mosaic community", which has nothing to do with Moses, but everything to do with a picture made up of broken pieces of tile! Their reason for being is to see broken and fragmented humanity brought together and made beautiful under the "artful hands of God". I suppose every church should be like that! Here was a woman who might have said that she was "too broken to belong" and there are people in our society who, when life gets messed up, feel "too broken to belong" to Church. We don't know anything about this woman's circumstances: has she been divorced 5 times? (twice was acceptable!) Is she regarded as 'damaged goods'? Have her 5 husbands died and so she has been bereaved so often? We don't know. There's a new man in her life, but they are not married: is there some stigma? What does Jesus do?

Let's go back to the water and the well! *"If you..." (John 4:10)* *"Everyone who..." (John 4:13f)* Jesus listens to her; He understands her life; then He offers her life! What is it exactly that Jesus does for this woman? He offers her the gift of God; He offers her grace that will reshape her life. He will give her a sense that she is loved, accepted, cared for; He will give her a notion that her sins are forgiven and that it doesn't really matter that her life is messy; He will give her a sense of self-worth, that for all the reasons we've mentioned already why this conversation should never have taken place, yet she is loved by God and blessed. *"Living water"* is the picture that Jesus uses to help us understand all of that. She is thirsty – for what? For love? For acceptance? For belonging? For peace? For forgiveness? For happiness in her life? Jesus offers her all of that and a million things more!

*"Come see..." (John 4:29)* It's a slight exaggeration, but that's her excitement! Her water jar is abandoned by the side of the well. She is so excited that she runs back to the village to bring everyone else out to meet Jesus. We might be frightened off by the notion of Jesus as the One who *"Told me..." (John 4:29)* but not her; she is excited because not only has this man told her everything about her past, but He has treated her with grace and compassion and she sees that and wants everyone else

to see it too. There is something of a mini-revival in that village: the people come to see Jesus and listen to Him and He's invited to stay; a Jew in enemy territory! At the end they say: "We no..." (*John 4:42*) They have met Jesus; they have encountered His grace and compassion; they have been persuaded and they have believed and the village is changed! It began with an encounter at the well, with a woman who lives on the edge, who doesn't really fit.

I read something recently about wells and how the Church does mission in a community where people don't always fit. It was all about wells and fences in farming communities and that so often in Church we have put up fences and we expect people to come inside and stay inside these well-built fences. "In Australia, ranches are so vast that fences are simply not a viable way of keeping animals together. Under these conditions, a farmer has to sink a bore and create a well, a precious water supply in outback... Livestock, though they will stray, will never roam too far from the well." (*Untamed* Hirsch and Hirsch p.152) The Church has a well of living water to offer the world, to offer people we know; the gospel is living water to bless us and the lives of others, not all of whom fit the imaginary mould that we might have in our minds. Rather than trying to fence people in, we have a well of living water to offer, the blessing of God to change people's lives, grace to help lives that are messy and broken, that draws people to Jesus.

Grace: God's love to people who don't deserve it. Grace has moved God to love a world that doesn't love Him very much; grace persuaded Jesus to give His life on the cross; grace is at the heart of the gospel, God loving us when we have forgotten to love God. When we grasp this idea of grace it does all kinds of things: it changes our attitude to ourselves, that we are loved and accepted by God and we no longer have to prove ourselves to Him or to other people; it changes our attitudes to other people, that we are more accepting of others as they are, rather than make them conform; it changes our attitude to the Church, that we are a family of people whom God has graced together, broken lives reshaped under the artful hands of God; it changes our attitude to God, loving Him from our hearts rather than staying away. Grace is the heart of the gospel.

What do we see? We see Jesus speaking to, listening to, a woman at the well. There are so many reasons why He should not! Yet, grace is the reason why He should. He is full of grace for a woman whose life was a mess in all kinds of ways; He gave her all that she needed. Will the real Jesus please stand up? Here's the real Jesus: the man of grace, who loves us when our love for Him has grown cold, when we've lost our way in faith or never had any faith in the first place; He loves us when life is a mess; He cares for us when no-one else seems to bother. Here is living water!