

JOHN 4:5-42  
MESSY CHURCH

*Messy Church* happens once a month on a Saturday afternoon in Juniper Green; some of you have come; some of you are part of the team. Children, parents, grandparents come – it is billed as church for families. We serve afternoon tea; there are crafts and other activities, all built around a Bible story – last month we told the parable of unforgiving servant, and we decorated mugs as a present for someone, decorated cakes showing happy and sad faces. There is worship at the end: we sing songs, we tell the story and we pray together. Here's the fascinating thing: this is our seventh season of *Messy Church* but we've never had the same group of people twice; there is always someone new, always a different group. Some people come who come to other things we do, but for others they say that they would not do church at all if it was not for *Messy Church*. We put up the banner on the railings at the front, people see it and come in; *Messy Church* has introduced us to people that we would never meet otherwise, because they wouldn't come through the front door on a Sunday; Sunday church is too daunting for them and what we do on a Sunday is a million miles away from anything they know and with which they are familiar.

*Messy Church* is a world-wide phenomenon. There are *Messy Church* groups all over Scotland, all of the UK, in many parts of the world. There are three parts to it: food, activities and worship and then people do these in a way and at a time that suits best. So, we do Saturday afternoon; other people do it midweek and do a whole meal for people and that works for them. It is Church for families; it is not a children's club! We have fun together, but we work hard to tell people bible stories and lead people to experience something of Jesus. When we first introduced the idea, there were people who didn't like the title; they didn't like the idea of "Messy Church!" It didn't convey the right message for them! But the more I see the church, the more I think that the Church as a whole is becoming more and more messy and if the church was ordered and calm, that might suggest church that is dead or dying!

We have met people we would not otherwise have met: the Muslim woman and her two boys who came to see what it was like, a community event; the boxer and his wife and their children who have come and found a place to learn and take part; Grandparents have found a place to bring their grandchildren when the parents might not have time or the inclination; the parents who come with children and say "this is my church"; the man who came because his daughter came on a Saturday and that was his time to be with her and against his will found that he enjoyed church. It is not neat and tidy; we may not see how some of these stories end, but this is mission and this is the church on edge of our society. Who is the gospel for?

Some of that is at the heart of the story of the woman at the well encountering Jesus. We talked earlier about water and the living water that Jesus offered, but now let's take a closer look at the woman herself and her meeting with Jesus; what impact did that make on her? She is not a "church person"; she is not even someone at the heart of her own village. She comes to draw water at midday; normally this is a 'first-thing-in-morning' job; this suggests that she is trying to avoid people, perhaps to hide, not to be noticed. Maybe her heart sinks when she comes to the well and sees that there is someone else there? Not only that, but it is a man and not only that, but he is a Jew! There is a conversation; there is an encounter and that encounter changes the woman's life. Let's see how!

It begins with that embarrassing opening: "Will you..." (*John 4:7f*) There are two reasons why this conversation seems a bad idea: she is a woman and a Samaritan. We like to think that we've moved on, enlightened; women are treated equally now in our society – really? But in Jesus' day women were certainly second class people, treated as goods and chattels and men just didn't speak to them in public, even their wives, and certainly not strangers. To complicate things, she is a Samaritan; they are a mixed race people, the result of forced migration and settlement in Israel 500 years before and these settlers intermarried with Jews

and produced this mixed-race people that the Jews despised; they were sworn enemies. How can Jesus, who looks like the epitome of Jewish maleness, speak to this Samaritan woman? He will even ask her for a drink? He talks about living water and the woman is intrigued – “you have no bucket!”

The conversation moves on; there is more to this than meets the eye. “*Go, call...*” (John 4:16) “*I have...*” (John 4:17f) What do you make of this woman now? Has she gone up or down in your eyes? Do you think less of her now that you know she has had five husbands and is living with a man, unmarried? There are all kinds of theories about this – she is a loose woman who just accumulates men; she is hungry for someone to love her and can’t find the man who will love her. There is a much more ordinary explanation: life has been messy for her. We don’t know what happened to her five husbands: did they all die? Did some of them divorce her? Whatever the answer, her life is messy, unconventional; maybe that is why she tries to hide in plain sight, why she comes to the well at midday, to stay away from other eyes or tricky questions from others in her village? There is more to come!

She creates a diversion; here’s a hot theological topic. “*Our fathers...*” (John 4:20) Where is the right place to worship? Is her question genuine, or is it an attempt to smokescreen any more revelations about her life? “*God is...*” (John 4:24) Jesus talks about worship and the way in which we worship, rather than the place. Worship is to come from the heart; God is not tied to any particular place. Surely, we understand this tactic: when the conversation gets too personal, we change the subject; we talk about the weather, the football, the rugby, anything but painful or personal things and that’s what she does and it’s intriguing, but it’s not the end.

Do you have an idea in your mind of the “church person”? This is the person who is “church” for you; this is the person who church is for, the ideal new recruit? Watch the disciples. They are puzzled. “Why is Jesus speaking to this woman; she is not one of us, not like us in any way!” Their attitudes are being challenged, their minds expanded; the gospel and grace are for everyone. For Jesus, this woman belongs in the kingdom. For Jesus, this village needs His time, attention, compassion, and the gospel. He will stay for two days! What’s your idea now – who belongs? Who is the gospel for?

“*Then leaving...*” (John 4:28f) That’s not quite true but that’s the way it seems to her; Jesus has told her everything about her life; certainly, He has told her the most private and perhaps the most painful things of her life. But here’s the thing: she’s glad to invite her friends to meet Him! She might have said: “Run away from a man like this; keep your distance; there’s a man at the well and you need to beware of Him; He sounds dangerous!” None of that. “Come see this man; come meet this man” and they came and met Jesus because of this woman’s testimony. Were you thinking “I’m not sure if I would listen to this woman; she sounds a bit iffy to me!”? Were you wondering if she could be trusted? How would you respond to this woman of a messy life telling you to come meet this man?

Two things happened: first, the woman’s life was changed; she found “living water” from Jesus and He changed her life; she found faith, she found the blessing of God on her life; she found love from God and her life was changed. Her thirst has been satisfied in coming to know Jesus and put her faith in Him. Secondly, village life was changed: “*They came...*” “*We no...*” (John 4:30,42) Jesus stayed in a Samaritan village for two days and spoke to them about – living water? People believed in Him; they heard for themselves and discovered that this man who was passing by their well is the Saviour of the world, Messiah! This is the transformation that takes place in one person’s life when she begins to encounter Jesus; this is the transformation that takes place in a community when people begin to encounter Jesus through the testimony of others and then see for themselves what Jesus is like and what He has done.

Two things for us to do: first, open our hearts to the living water, to Jesus, to His love for us. Here is someone who knows everything about us and still loves us. The gospel version of that

is in Romans 5: “*God demonstrates...*” (Romans 5:8) We need to open our hearts to Jesus, to His love for us, for Him to care for us, to give us His Spirit, so that we may live by faith. There is something transforming about that; living water changes our lives, to be lives that are filled with the blessing of God. That only happens when we open our hearts to Jesus and pray for Him to help us, to love us, to save us. Open our hearts to the living water and find that Jesus knows us, loves us, cares for us, and blesses us with every gift and blessing of God.

Secondly, tell someone about Jesus. Pray for an opportunity to tell someone you know something important about Jesus; pray for the courage to take that opportunity when it comes along; pray for the wisdom to know what to say. It goes against the grain of all our natural instincts, to keep head down, to keep these important and sometimes private things to ourselves, but here’s the challenge to tell someone about Jesus. “*Come, see...*” (John 4:29) – that may not be your best line, but there will be another way, your way of telling someone else something important that might just be the first step for them on the road to faith for themselves.

An outsider, not even on the fringe of church; a Samaritan woman; is she unpromising material? Yet, Jesus spends time with her, talks to her, listens to her, answers her questions, loves her, cares for her, treats her with acceptance and compassion, speaks to her about important life issues. Is that how we are with people we meet? with everyone we meet? Do we want church to be neat and tidy, full of quiet good order? Are we ready for church to be messy? Are we ready to be a Church where the Spirit is at work, with people in whom the Spirit is at work, where Jesus is at the centre and is offering living water to people whose hearts are open?