

JOHN 4:5-42  
LIVING WATER

Conversation is a good thing! Talking to one another is always good. There are all kinds of ways in which we have conversations now: we still talk face-to-face; we talk on the phone; I suppose you can have a conversation by text, or WhatsApp but you can't read someone's face and that's always a part of the face-to-face conversation!

We have planned conversations: someone says "I need to talk to you" and we arrange a time and place to meet and have coffee together and have the conversation; there are times when we get anxious about these conversations because what does this person want? Why do we need a conversation? What question do they have? What revelation or decision are they going to share? Or there is a purpose to that conversation, something to arrange, a problem to resolve and so the conversation needs to be done, and needs to be arranged in advance to make sure that it takes place.

There are chance conversations: people you meet unexpectedly and you take time to chat, over coffee, or lunch, or simply for 5 minutes in the street, and you come away feeling glad to have met someone that you've not seen for a while! I quite often have these chance conversations on my trip to and from the shop in the morning when I'm collecting my paper!

Conversation is good for lots of reasons. We pass on information that someone else needs to know; there might be questions to ask and answer and it can be easier to do that face-to-face than in any other way. We get to know someone else a little better because conversation can often share feelings and reactions to events as well; this happened and this is how I reacted and even if we don't put that reaction into lots of words we can read someone's face; are they sad or happy? Conversation builds relationships: church is always looking for ways to help people get to know each other better; when we ran Open House at the Manse for the first time, there was a conversation between two people who had been part of the church for 25 years but this was the first time they had been in the same place to talk to one another; we run the soup and roll lunch and people tell me they can have a deeper conversation over lunch than at any other time in church life.

We see Jesus in conversation! Last week, John told us of the conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus, an important man, a leader in Israel, someone at the heart of society and life in Israel. Today's conversation is with someone very different! This is one of these chance encounters, unplanned, that happen and that show us something quite profound about Jesus and help us see something quite important about the gospel. It didn't start off that way! Jesus and His disciples are travelling to Galilee; they have to go through Samaritan territory and at noon, they stop outside the town of Sychar; the disciples go to find food and Jesus sits by the well. The well would often be the place for conversations, the place where the women meet, waiting their turn to get water; this woman comes to draw water and unexpectedly there is a man there! Does that discomfort her? What makes it worse – he speaks to her? He asks her for a drink? She has come at midday to try to avoid other people but she can't avoid this conversation with a man she doesn't know!

There are two reasons why this is a surprising conversation. Firstly, there is a gender issue: in that culture, men and women didn't have conversations in public, usually because of male attitudes to women; women were beneath them so they could not be seen to be talking to them in any way, let alone as equals. Secondly, there is an issue about Jews and Samaritans and John hints at this in his notes – "*Jews do...*" (*John 4:9*) yet here is Jesus the Jew sitting by a Samaritan well opening up a conversation with a Samaritan woman! Who is to have a conversation with Jesus? Does it need to be only the best kind of people? Well, here is someone who doesn't fit that bill in terms of the way society sees her or she even sees herself. Not only are there these two pieces of culture that should keep them apart, but we later discover that life is a bit of a mess for this woman; her relationships are broken and she is

despised and ostracized; her life is troubled; she doesn't fit the mould of the perfect citizen, yet here is Jesus in conversation with her!

There are three topics of conversation:

Firstly, water: "give me a drink!" "Why?" "I can give you living water!" "You don't have a bucket!" "This is water for the soul, life-giving water and you'll never be thirsty again!" Water is seen here as a picture of eternal life, the soul and spirit that is dry and broken being renewed and mended; a dry and dusty life given everything she needs.

Secondly, her husband: "Go call..." (*John 4:16f*) Is this the place where her life feels most broken? Has she tried and tried to find happiness with husbands but it hasn't worked? Either her husbands have died over and over again, or they have left her; she is now on number six but they are not married!

Thirdly, worship, but this seems a bit of a diversion from the second; "let's change the subject because husbands is too prickly". There is a controversy about where to worship, a difference of opinion between the Jews and Samaritans. For Jesus, the place does not matter, but the spirit does: "true worshippers..." (*John 4:23f*)

"Come see..." (*John 4:29*) What do you make of that? Is it a bit of an exaggeration: Jesus did say some quite revealing things but didn't altogether tell her everything about her life. Is it scary: would we want to be friends with someone who knew us like that? Is this not Big Brother and the Thought Police out to control our lives? Is this like CCTV cameras catching our every move across the town? Somehow none of that mattered to the woman; people came from the village to meet Jesus! When she said "come see..." (*John 4:29*) they came to see Jesus and hear what He had to say. He ended up staying there for a couple of days and those whose interest was aroused by what the woman said, now believed Jesus by what they saw and heard for themselves. It all began with a chance conversation by the well.

We've listened in to the conversation; we have heard what was said. But what was it about the conversation that made the woman and her village react so well to Jesus? Was it something that He said? Was it the notion of "living water". Was there something in His manner? What did He communicate without words? Was there something in His face, in the way that He looked at the woman, in His manner, that encouraged her and didn't dismiss her? It seems to me that Jesus was interested in the woman in the best possible way, that He listened to her keenly and maybe nobody had ever done that for her before. Was that something that struck her most, that here was someone who was interested in her, interested in what she needed and what she thought about life? Not only was Jesus interested, but He cared for her and genuinely wanted to help her; again this might well have been the first time that someone actually showed her that they cared about her. Jesus was interested in her; Jesus listened to her; Jesus cared for her.

I've been in conversations where the person I have been talking to is looking over my shoulder or around the room while talking to me and you get feeling he is looking for someone more interesting than me! I hope I never do that to you! It makes me feel just a little bit small, that I'm almost invisible to the person with whom I am in conversation and it is not a nice feeling. Be interested! I meet people in need and sometimes I'm the first person who has taken the time to listen to them and give them the time and space to tell their story; nobody else has taken the time, nobody else is interested in them, nobody else gives the impression that they care! I'm not saying that because it is me that does this; I'm telling you more to highlight the need in people's hearts and minds for that kind of care.

Jesus is interested in us! Jesus listens to us! Jesus cares for us! "Come see..." (*John 4:29*) For one woman that "everything" meant her desert of relationships. For each of us it will be something different! Jesus knows us! We don't need to explain ourselves to Him, though He loves us to open our hearts when we pray; we don't need to make excuses, just say to Him "This is me!" He is interested, He listens, He cares. Sometimes it doesn't seem that way to us,

but that is more about us and the way we feel and the way we see life than it is about Jesus. That's OK! He knows that about us too! On the outside we may look "sorted" but often the reality inside is very different: we can be stressed, or scared, or thirsty for someone to care for us, or life is messy, our minds all over the place, we can't sleep at night! Jesus knows that about us too!

"Living water" – this is hard for us because our issue with water is usually that there is too much of it! I was watching a programme on television on Tuesday under the banner of Sport Relief – a group of celebrities were in the Namibian desert, cycling and walking through the desert to raise money for people in need. They were travelling through a landscape where there was next to nothing but sand and doing it in temperatures of 40°C. Water was life-giving; not all of them completed all of their tasks because the heat got to them; they survived by water! "Living water" – Jesus gives life. In the desert of a broken relationship with God because of sin, Jesus brings life, He dies that we might be forgiven, He loves us and gives His life for us that we might be reconciled with God. In the desert of our sense of guilt, He forgives. In the desert of despair when life gets too hard, He brings hope. In the desert of our anxiety and fear, Jesus is with us and gives us courage and brings us peace. This is "living water"! Jesus meets us where we are and gives us what we need. He is interested in us; He listens to us; He cares for us! Speak with Him, pray! Open your heart, tell Him how things are with you, let Him heal your wounds and bring hope to your heart. When we meet others who are struggling with what's going on just now and are afraid or anxious, tell them about "living water"; tell them that Jesus brings grace to help them!