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## Sermon

### ***A Master Class in Evangelism***

**John 4:4-19, 25-30, 39-42**

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I have chosen today's gospel reading because it is AAW Sunday and because Joy had the theme "Outreach" in her retreat yesterday. This reading might be called "Evangelism 103: A Master Class in Evangelism." Jesus reaches out to a woman across multiple cultural boundaries and she then in turn tells her town and brings them to meet him. It is an example of what we all need to be ready to do. Engage people in conversation, draw them towards spiritual revelation and once they have got it, send them out to do the same.

#### **Samaritans and Jews Antipathy**

Some cultural background to this account is needed. There was hostility between Jews and Samaritans. When the Northern Jewish kingdom fell in 722BC, most of the people were taken away by the Assyrians into exile and other people were moved into their land. The Northern kingdom already had paganism from the time of its second king Jeroboam; now these incoming people brought their beliefs and practices to mix with that. The incomers had trouble with attacks by lions and thought the problem was they were not worshipping the god of this land. So they asked about Judaism and adopted portions of it. They only followed the Pentateuch, rejecting all the rest of the Old Testament. So the Jews regarded them as pagan and unclean.

John tells us that Jesus had to go through Samaria. He was heading from Judea north to Cana in Galilee. Samaria which was to Jews a hostile area. Many would avoid travelling through it by taking a route up the Jordan River until they had passed it by and then head NW into Galilee. However, Galileans were known to take the shortcut through Samaria when they had to go to Jerusalem. Maybe Jesus had to go through Samaria because he always obeyed the Father and that is what he was told to do.

<sup>7</sup> *When a Samaritan woman came to draw water, Jesus said to her ....*

Stop! The next cultural problem. Rabbinical rulings said, "One should not talk with a woman on the street, not even with his own wife, and certainly not with somebody else's wife, because of people's gossip." Another was, "It is forbidden to give a woman any greeting."

Jesus had sent his disciples into the town to get food and he waits tired and thirsty at midday. So when she came to draw water he said to her, "Will you give me a drink?"

<sup>9</sup> *The Samaritan woman said to him, "You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?"* And John puts in the comment: *(For Jews do not associate with Samaritans.)*

Add to the cultural barriers, we have already discussed, there was a further, particular barrier which made this request even more surprising. Pharisaic interpretation of the purity laws meant Jews and Samaritans could not use drinking vessels together.<sup>1</sup> The Greek verb translated associate in the NIV can also be "use jointly." So it was alright for the disciples to buy food from Samaritan men but it was not alright to eat or drink with them. So now Jesus has crossed or proposed to cross three barriers: ethnicity, gender and purity rules. It's hardly surprising that the woman was amazed?

Then followed a wonderful conversation working at two levels in which Jesus is talked about spiritual life and salvation and she about physical water. Jesus commented that if she knew who he was and what gift he had to offer (the Holy Spirit), then she would ask him for living water. That was designed to intrigue and puzzle her into asking questions.

"Living water" that is odd to our ears. It meant running or bubbling water; spring or river water not pond or tank water. She thinks of Jacob's well which she calls a spring. Some wells are dug down to the point where they intersect an underground watercourse, so they access spring water. Jesus uses the term for God's spiritual provision for us of the Holy Spirit.

She is puzzled because he doesn't have any means of drawing water (it is about 100 feet deep). What other water source does he know of? Is he greater than the patriarch, Jacob? He has her starting to ponder on his greatness.

At this point, Jesus has thrown out a lure and he gives it a jiggle to attract her attention to the more important matter. (v13) *"Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give him will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life."*

Natural water cannot prevent one from being thirsty again. Jesus' Living water quenches spiritual thirst with a lasting satisfaction.

Natural water stays outside the soul and does not meet its needs. Living Water enters into the soul and remains there.

Natural water is of limited quantity. Living water becomes a spring inside.

Do know the living water that Jesus offers? We hear of it from **Isaiah 55**:

Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost. Why spend money on what is not bread, and your labour on what does not satisfy? Listen, listen to me, and eat what is good, and your soul will delight in the richest of fare.<sup>2</sup>

Jesus speaks of it again in John 7:

Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him." By this he meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were later to receive.<sup>3</sup>

Have you received the well of living water that wells up to eternal life? Are you thirsty for it?

She is interested in a physical water supply which would save her carrying jugs back and forth each day, so she asks for this living water. Jesus has appealed to her craving for ultimate rest and satisfaction. But she doesn't understand yet and there are matters to sort out still. So Jesus digs down a level and tells her to call her husband.

<sup>17</sup> *"I have no husband," she replied.*

*Jesus said to her, "You are right when you say you have no husband. The fact is, you have had five husbands, and the man you now have is not your husband. What you have just said is quite true."*

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<sup>1</sup> Journal of Biblical Literature, 69(1950), 137-147

<sup>2</sup> Is 55:1-2

<sup>3</sup> John 7:38-39

We would have known there was something wrong – why was she fetching water in the middle of day? It is the hot time of day; all the women and children do it when it is cool in the morning. Is it shame? Is she excluded?

We would probably assume she is just not a good wife or unlucky with her husbands – but again that is because of the cultural blinkers we wear. In that culture, divorce was unusual and shameful. But she would have been divorced multiple times because of infertility. That too was a reason for shame and rejection. We know it is not easy even nowadays in the West, but then in the Middle East it was terrible. She would be regarded as cursed.

Do you remember Bishop Given telling us his father would beat his mother because she was barren. There are such strong parallels to what we see in Africa. Women and children carrying water for kilometres and praying with women (or sometimes couples) who long to have a child both because of the natural longing of parents for children and because of the cultural shame.

Well Jesus had the gift of a word of knowledge whereby the Holy Spirit showed him what was going on: She has had five husbands and is now co-habiting with a man. He is not working from a guess about why she might be excluded, he is shown the detail.

The accuracy of his insight startles her and she calls him a prophet – meaning one who knows things from God. At this point she goes into an aside which diverts attention from her personal situation. Certainly, the question of where they should worship was source of conflict between Jews and Samaritans and maybe such a prophet would help her. Maybe she wanted to think about how to respond to God. Often with conversations about Jesus people divert away from what is most important for them to hear. So we will not on this occasion follow that line of the conversation interesting though Jesus' answer is. Maybe she is not convinced by his response for she says that the Messiah when he comes would be able to make it clear.

Then and there, Jesus makes the clear statement, *"I who speak to you am he."* (v26)

At this point they are interrupted by the disciples who have come back with lunch and are amazed that he is talking to a Samaritan and a woman.

*<sup>27</sup> Just then his disciples returned and were surprised to find him talking with a woman. But no-one asked, "What do you want?" or "Why are you talking with her?"*

Remember they would not have thought of addressing her, so these are questions for Jesus. The answers would have been, 'I want a drink of water and I am talking to her so I can give her living water.'

*<sup>28</sup> Then, leaving her water jar, the woman went back to the town and said to the people, <sup>29</sup> "Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did. Could this be the Christ?" <sup>30</sup> They came out of the town and made their way towards him.*

Leaving her water jar – there's a nice eyewitness detail. She may have been leaving it for him to draw water, now that she knew he would be content to drink from her container and that he still needed physical water.

"Come, see!" This is the call to follow Jesus. We heard it when Andrew had found Jesus, "Come and see."<sup>4</sup> John the Baptist announced of Jesus: "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." "I have seen and I testify that this is the Son of God."<sup>5</sup>

Now the third reported evangelist is this Samaritan woman who boldly presses through the shame and exclusion she has known to tell her people the good news that she has found the Messiah.

Now we skip forward again – it is a long account and we cannot deal with it all in one sermon.

In verse 39, many of the people from that town believed in him because of that insight into her life. When they heard him speak many more became believers. And what did they believe? That this man really is the

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<sup>4</sup> John 1:41

<sup>5</sup> John 1:29 & 34

Saviour of the World. They got it! Have you understood that Jesus is the Saviour of the World? Have you told others that he is the Saviour of the World?

What can we learn from these two evangelists in action?

Jesus:

- crosses cultural barriers to talk to her.
- He asks a favour of her – related to what she is doing which starts the conversation.
- He throws in a puzzling spiritual reference to get her thinking.
- He appeals to her unsatisfied desire for rest and satisfaction.
- He uses the spiritual insight he is given.
- He declares that he is the Messiah – and with the evidence before her, she believes.

The woman:

- crosses a cultural barrier to speak to her townsfolk when she is semi-outcast.
- She tells them of her experience and offers her new belief in the form of a question.
- She brings them to Jesus.

We all need to have received that gift of living water and be looking for conversations where we too can invite others to meet Jesus.