

**Thursday March 11<sup>th</sup>: The Samaritan Woman: [John 4:1-26](#):  
'I who speak to you am he'**

*Sculpture near Sea of Galilee*



Many car satellite navigation systems provide a number of alternative ways of getting from A to B including the shortest route, the fastest route and the most eco-friendly route. They also warn of hazards ahead such as roadworks and accidents and

route us around them. Because of the entrenched antipathy between Jews and Samaritans, rooted in events of past centuries which had not been forgotten, Jewish people wishing to travel north to Galilee often had to take a major detour to avoid the hazardous journey through Samaria (where a racially motivated attack was always a danger) which added considerable time and distance to the journey. Jesus and his disciples took no such detour but had managed to reach the town of Sychar, not a safe place for a group of Jews to be, without incident. The local well is the setting for an encounter that demonstrates just how radical is the Messiah who the Samaritan woman finds sitting on the well she has come to use. In addressing her and asking her for a drink Jesus is effectively driving a coach and horses through time honoured and deeply ingrained prejudices of his time and culture relating to morality, gender and race. To our minds there is nothing particularly unusual in this encounter; but at that time and in that place Jesus' actions were dynamite.

As Jesus reached across the chasm that separated his people from her people the conversation included the complexities of her own personal life but focused mainly on the offer of living water and the nature of true worship. It's clear that she was someone who found relationships difficult. She has been married five times and presumably divorced five times which would have given her a certain reputation locally (which is why she avoids coming to the well with the rest of the local women in the cooler conditions in the early morning or late evening). Jesus knows all this but starts by asking for her help because he is thirsty; an act in itself culturally scandalous. But it is important in the context of the conversation that Jesus subsequently has with this woman that she has just done something to help him.

As Christians we very properly put a lot of emphasis on what we can do for others both in terms of meeting the needs we see around us and sharing the Christian message. But being able to receive is also important and often undervalued. Back in the early 1990s I was involved in a project that provided finance and resources for a project to help orphan children in the city of Timișoara in Romania not long after the fall of the communist regime. Whilst we were ostensibly there to help it was extremely important that we also allowed people to give to us. We were invited to meals on many occasions and were very much aware that our hosts were giving to us sacrificially; there really wasn't all that much food to go round and a lot of queueing was sometimes required to get it. Yet if we had refused hospitality and effectively said (not necessarily in words but communicated nonetheless), 'we've come here to give to you and you have nothing of value to give to us' it would have reflected an attitude of superiority which, whether we meant it to or not, would have undermined the self-esteem and offended the hospitable nature of those who simply wanted to give something back.

So Jesus talks about water to one who has given him water to satisfy his thirst in the burning heat of the noonday sun; the conversation could not have taken place without his willingness to receive from her. Of course he is talking about a different kind of water and just as Nicodemus, when he hears the phrase 'you must be born again', can only see a ridiculous mental image of people entering their mother's womb a second time (John 3 v 4), so the Samaritan woman finds it hard to think that Jesus is offering anything other than a supply of drinkable water that will obviate the need to keep visiting the well (v 15). Yet this living or running water is a metaphor for the life and presence of God within the human heart. Jesus is saying that because God is spirit (v 24), worshippers do not have to travel to a specific location to get near to him, whether that be Jerusalem or Mount Gerizim (where the Samaritan Temple stood), instead he longs to find a home in the human heart (John 14 v 23).

This truth has had great relevance for Christians during lockdown as churches have been closed and the only way to access worship is online. For those without internet access the estrangement from public worship has been all the more painful. To know that Jesus lives in our hearts wherever we are and that we can pray, read our Bibles, sing songs of worship and praise and thank him for his love at home or wherever we happen to be has been of paramount importance. However this doesn't mean that going to church is relegated to being an optional extra; the writer to the Hebrews specifically encourages his readers not to neglect the act of worshipping with others (Heb 10 v 25). So, for example, remembering the sacrifice of Jesus as we celebrate Holy Communion together in church is a hugely formative experience for those who follow him, which is why he commands us to do it (Luke 22 v 19). Yet many clergy also take Holy Communion to members of the church who are housebound, in hospital or in care emphasising that 'place', whilst significant (bearing in mind that

Jesus does attach an importance to the Jerusalem Temple in what he says - v 22) is not the be all and end all.

The most important thing about worship, says Jesus, is that it is 'in spirit and in truth' (v 24). When we worship God, whether we are physically in church, watching a service online or reading our Bibles and praying at home, what really matters is that it is a transformative encounter with the living God. We can go to church all our lives and say and sing all the right words but still not have our hearts touched or set on fire. Worship, giving to God what he is worth, is about being open to change; when we truly find room in our hearts for him it will transform us. The Samaritan woman with the complex love life and terrible reputation locally becomes an evangelist, telling those who shun her in the street and snigger behind her back that she may well have found the Messiah (John 4 v 29). She isn't sure but the bravery with which she turns to the community that spurned her and opens her heart to them suggests that real transformation has taken place.

She doesn't understand everything and there is still a journey ahead (which we know nothing about). As we worship, not just with our lips but in our hearts and minds in spirit and in truth, we too know that we are only part way there. Worship is more than lip service, it has to be real and reflect a genuine desire to put God at the heart of our lives. Only when we consciously and intentionally place ourselves in the presence of God can the living water flow. We might feel that, having once known that spring within, the water has become somewhat stagnant and we are somewhat becalmed. The Samaritan woman can inspire us to find who we really are once again. If we feel we are walking through a spiritual desert, this passage offers us living water to drink that will well up to eternal life (v 14). It is by drinking deep that the thirst for God that all humans possess, whether they are conscious of it or not, can be satisfied forever.

**Questions:** What does mean to you to worship 'in spirit and in truth'? How can we prevent our Christian lives from becoming dry and running into the sand?

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, as we worship you in spirit and in truth, touch our hearts, open us to the streams of living water you offer us, and enable us to share the water of life with others. Amen.