

## John 4 4-29 St Marc 28.4.24

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Our Gospel reading told us of the meeting that Jesus had with a Samaritan woman when he and his disciples were passing through Samaria on their way to Galilee. Around midday Jesus, having sent his disciples to a nearby town to buy lunch, sat down at a well tired and thirsty. The only other person there was a Samaritan woman who had come to draw water.

There were 3 reasons why Jesus should not have been in the situation of talking to this woman.

1. Respectable men (especially religious leaders) would avoid talking to a woman in public for fear of being suspected of immorality.
2. Jewish men regarded women as inferior - Rabbinic prayer: I thank you God that you did not create me a gentile, a slave or a woman.
3. She was a Samaritan - and Jews hated Samaritans so much that they would go miles out of their way to avoid them.

As their conversation unfolded there was a further barrier that could have existed between her and Jesus - her lifestyle. Having been married 5 times and now living with a man made her a social outcast- even from other Samaritan woman.

**What is this passage about?**

**Redemption not forgiveness**

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Every commentary I have read either describes her as immoral or an adulterous. They assume that Jesus' acceptance of her is the restoration of a sinner. – but that doesn't fit with the way she is described or the way Jesus talks – nowhere does he talk about forgiveness or change of lifestyle. This is not about forgiveness of a sinner but the healing and restoration of an abused woman.

In a way that so many women would identify with she is doubly abused. As we shall see she is firstly abused by the men in her life and then she is abused by being blamed for the position that abuse has left her in. In the isolation from the other women in her village, in the attitude of the disciples who thought Jesus shouldn't have been talking to her and in the interpretation of this event by commentators through the century, it is assumed that she was responsible for her position.

We would like to say, "Oh that's how things used to be", but actually in many cases women are still taught to live in shame for abuse they have experienced, accused of dressing or looking the wrong way, or in some way being responsible for the way that men have treated them. There are also many men and women treated as if their homelessness, their, addiction, their needing to flee their home country is somehow their fault. In a world where there are so many who, like the Samaritan woman are double victims, this passage offers challenge and hope:

### **Challenge and hope**

It offers **challenge** to us when we look at someone's life and label them according to what we see without understanding the journey that led to that point. Secondly it offers **hope** to those who are abused by individuals and society and feel judged by those who don't understand.

In the culture in which she lived, a respectable man would expect his wife to be a virgin when he married. At the same time the husband could easily divorce her if he chose. As a divorced woman her marriage opportunities would be considerably reduced. If her family were too ashamed - or too poor - to take her back then her only means of survival would be to marry again. In this situation she is more likely to have to marry a more unstable or unsuitable husband who might later decide to divorce and move on. A woman in this situation would quickly find herself in a downward spiral of deteriorating relationships. By the time she met Jesus, the woman at the well had experienced all the pain and degradation of being passed from one man to another until she had to settle for an informal relationship with no security.

It was her culture and the behaviour of others had conspired to push her down and so she was treated as an outcast and sinner - not because of what she had done – or what she had chosen - but because of what had been done to her. In his conversation with the woman Jesus reverses all the oppression that she had lived under:

### **No longer Outcast, but privileged**

#### **Jesus reveals who he is**

Firstly he raises her to a privileged position of being the only person he revealed his true identity to before the end of his ministry - and allowed her to become the means through whom many came to believe in him.

#### **God will live in her and flow through her**

Secondly his reference to living water holds out the promise of a special position as God carrier. The whole conversation about worship centred on where God was encountered – was it in the temple or on a mountain? Jesus looks ahead to following his death, resurrection and ascension that God, by his Holy Spirit would live in the hearts of true believers. St. Paul later described all believers as temples of the Holy Spirit - in other words the place where God is encountered.

The reference to springs of living water would have immediately made early Jewish hearers remember the promise in Ezekiel that streams of living water would flow out from the temple into the desert bringing God's life wherever it flowed. Here is the first suggestion that people could become the temple of God through whom God's life flows to other. In advance of Pentecost this unacceptable, abused and condemned woman is the only one to have the promise of being the temple of God –the place where he rules and from whom new life spreads out into the desert. St John reinforced the truth of this by

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telling us that she was the cause of many Samaritan's in her village believing.

To all who have been victims of injustice and abuse the good news of the Gospel we can declare is that Jesus understands not only what you have been through - but also why it has made you who you are today.

It is very easy for us to judge one another simply by appearances and behaviour in the present – There are several categories of people who find themselves at the bottom of the pile – neglected and despised by others yet not in that opposition by choice – many of the young addicts on the streets are a consequence of the British care system – Refugees are not necessarily spongers on the state – but people who have been forced to move because of horrific home situations and are desperate and scared. Surviving on long-term benefit is often almost impossible – so we shouldn't be surprised that many also take on menial jobs as well. Prostitution is rarely a profession of choice many prostitutes enter prostitution through a route of abuse and poverty. Society is quick to brand people sinners - but there are many situations where in Jesus' eyes I believe they are victims to be restored and healed. We need to learn to see with the compassionate eyes of Jesus and perhaps we would find many who believe themselves to be outcasts - who are used to being treated as sinners - but have a special place in Jesus' heart.

To those who discover themselves on the wrong side of condemnation -those who are double victims, carrying the scars of what others have done to them and the

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blame for their own scars, this passage brings a double hope

1. Firstly Jesus understands our journey and doesn't criticise us based on where we have got to – but loves us absolutely and unconditionally
2. Such is the upside down nature of God's Kingdom that this abused and rejected woman is given a place in the early expressions of the Kingdom above even Jesus' disciples. Jesus has a special place in his heart for the abused and rejected - God so redeems our situation that the curse of our experience becomes the very possibility of blessing.