

Waters of Life

(Preached at Footscray Baptist Church on March 15, 2020 by Cheryl Williams– John 4:4-52)

In the heat of the day Jesus meets with a woman at Jacob's well. Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem from Galilee and the quickest route is through Samaria. She is a Samaritan who it appears has been shunned from her community, hence her being at the well to get water in the middle of the day, a time when none of the other women would be there.

Jews and Samaritans did not like each other. They both believed in God and the Samaritans followed the first five books of the Hebrew bible but did not follow the rest. They also disagreed about the place to worship God – the Jews thought it was Jerusalem, the Samaritans on a mountain. Like the Jews however, they too waited for a Saviour, for someone to save them, for a Messiah. Jesus has told stories about Samaritans before, remember the Good Samaritan, in that story, it is the Samaritan who is the hero.

So here we have an unnamed woman at the well in the heat. Alone in her thoughts, she is spoken to by a man. Not just any man – a Jewish man. Not just any Jewish man but a Rabbi. He asks for a drink. A simple request with profound implications.

That a man is alone and speaking to a woman was unthinkable and perhaps asking for trouble.

That a Jewish person is conversing with a Samaritan is unheard of and to give him water unthinkable as she would have been considered unclean.

This woman has secrets that will be uncovered and the reason she has been ostracised from her community will become clear, which again makes this encounter unthinkable.

The theological conversation they engage in is profound, it is deep and ends in Jesus revealing who he is.

Finally, she is utterly transformed and I think begins to live life in all its fullness.

Jesus reaching across social, gender, racial and religious boundaries has a very significant conversation with this unnamed woman. They talk theology, Jesus reveals who he is to her. She moves from very literal understandings of what Jesus is saying to thinking more deeply and eventually to sharing her new found understandings with the community from which she had been ostracised.

This woman is an outsider in her own world for reasons not entirely spelt out but probably to do with her current living arrangements. We find out she has had five husbands (this may not be the problem – as culturally if your husband dies you then need to marry his brother and on it goes, maybe this had happened a number of times.) However, she is not married to her current partner and that is probably the issue.

She is however not silly. She knows all about the theological differences between the Jews and Samaritans and knows one of the crucial issues is about where to worship God. She also knows about an expected Messiah.

As Jesus speaks to her he crosses over a triple jeopardy – race, religion and gender. He gives her dignity. As they speak, he talks about her marital situation but he doesn't judge her, he just asks and notes her honest answer.

She begins to change the way she sees him. He is no longer a Jewish man seeking water. He is now seen by her as a prophet – how else would he have known about her personal circumstances.

When she finally begins to understand what he really means about a few things

- a) About the fact that worship will not be about being where (Jerusalem or the mountain) but rather about how – in spirit and truth
- b) About Jesus being the Messiah for whom they wait
- c) About the gift of living water – eternal life

She is changed – she forgets even why she has come to the well and runs back to the town, back to the community who had ostracised her. Back to the town to tell of her experience, of her encounter, back to the town no longer afraid or ashamed.

Now she is bursting with excitement and has a bigger agenda. She invites them to come and see, come and see the Messiah who has revealed himself to her, who has proven himself to her. She has begun to sow seeds of faith in them as Jesus said we should do. This unnamed woman becomes the first missionary.

Her journey of faith has come full circle almost. From a literal conversation about sharing a drink to understanding believing in Jesus will bring life in all its fulness.

So, what does this mean for us?

Are we bringing others to see and experience life in all its fulness? Has our life with God moved us so much that we cannot do anything but share it with others?

Are we willing to break down barriers of race, religion, gender and offer only welcome and acceptance to those who are different?

Are we moved to reach out to others who are different rather than judge? To offer dignity to those we even disagree with?

Are we ready to move beyond our traditional theological understandings and be challenged to think differently?

Are we ready to risk our reputation and tell others of the love of God which we have experienced? Can we let go of our fear of what others will think and only concern ourselves with the call God has on our lives.

Are we willing to ask questions of our culture, of our faith, of ourselves?

If we live like this unnamed woman, what might Footscray Baptist Church begin to look like?

Those that drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give them will become like a spring of water gushing up to eternal life. (John 4)

The water of life, the water of freedom, the water of dignity, the water of compassion, the water of eternal life and love.

Hear the call to thirsty people, there's no need to thirst again

To the weary come beside still waters lie

Full of goodness full of mercy our cup will overflow

When the call of that deep river, is a voice we've come to know. (from Deeper River by Digby Hannah)
Amen.