

John 4 – The Samaritan Woman (*Main service baptism*)

We live in a world with many divisions:

- Left / right
- Brexit / remain
- Nottingham Forest / Derby County [or Mun U v Liverpool]

And there's a lot of prejudice around:

- Colour of your skin
- Country you come from
- Religion
- Gender
- Sexual orientation

So what does a story from nearly 2000 years ago have to say to a world like ours.

A little bit of history. Jesus was from the Jewish community, and the woman was a Samaritan. Hundreds of years before there had been one kingdom of Israel under kings Saul, David and Solomon. Civil war meant division into 2 kingdoms, and the north (confusingly still called Israel) had their capital at Samaria, and the south (the kingdom of Judah) at Jerusalem. Judah had the Temple, so the north worshipped at their own shrines.

Both kingdoms turned away from God's way. The south sometimes listened to the prophets and sometimes didn't. The north largely ignored them. Prophets like Amos who pointed out all of the social and economic injustices, and others pointed to how they had abandoned worshipping God with integrity.

In 722BC (or 721, depending who you read) the capital Samaria fell to the Assyrians, and the northern kingdom was over. The main people were deported and land resettled with people from elsewhere. Meanwhile the south hung on. Eventually the Assyrians went home. Then decades later a new Empire came knocking – the Babylonians and they captured Jerusalem, destroyed the original Temple, and took Judah into exile. In exile, they kept their traditions, remembered their old ways, and eventually returned and rebuilt.

So by Jesus' time, Jews and Samaritans often didn't get on. They had all that history between them, even though they had the same ancestry. The Jews saw themselves as the faithful ones, and saw Samaritans as lost – some had intermarried and their religious traditions were compromised. Many Jews saw Samaritans as foreigners to be looked down on. Meanwhile the Samaritans saw their traditions as unaltered by exile.

What does Jesus do? While cutting through Samaria to his next destination, he sits by a well – Jacob's Well as it was known. It's midday, so it's hot. No-one would normally be around at that time. But a Samaritan woman comes, perhaps to avoid meeting people. Jesus here asks her for a drink.

Here Jesus is crossing so many barriers in one question. Samaritans and Jews didn't always get on – they didn't always even talk to each other. They certainly didn't share cups and plates. And a lone man talking to a lone woman who was a stranger was pretty unusual too. And he asks her for help – to meet his physical need for water.

Jesus shows no prejudice based on religion, or on ancestry, and he talks and listens to the woman. And she has needs – we're told she had had 5 husbands and the man she was with now wasn't her husband. Men could write divorce notes for all kinds of trivial reasons, and many women were badly treated. This woman may well have been exploited or abused by men.

So Jesus has a conversation with her about water – as image of God's spirit, about temples and mountains as places of worship, and finally about the Messiah coming – the person the Jews and Samaritans were both waiting for, who would be anointed by God to lead them into freedom.

He invests time in a foreigner in an age of prejudice; he respects a woman in an age of sexism and abuse; and enters dialogue with someone who worshipped differently, in an era when Pharisees – the very orthodox Jews – had a great deal of influence.

And their conversation talks about where God can be worshipped. Many people think you need a building or a shrine to worship God; you don't. My friend is the vicar of a church that meets in the hall of a primary school.

The Samaritans had a special mountain, and many people find mountains point them to God, but you don't need a mountain either. You can even worship in Norfolk.

Jesus says that people will be able to worship God in spirit and in truth, and earlier he talks about God's spirit being like a well bubbling up inside us, helping us to worship. In other words, true worship is where our hearts are.

Think about two people who love each other. They can probably name special places for their relationship – the church where they got married, the location of their first date, a restaurant they live to eat at on special occasions and so on. Maybe they buy each other special gifts at certain times of year. But that's not the sum total of their relationship. If the restaurant closed, it wouldn't be over. Things can help, but the love is in their hearts.

And so it is with God. We don't need stuff to know God, we need *faith, trust, hope* and most of all *love*. And when we put our trust in God, he helps us by being right alongside us by his spirit living in us. And when he is alongside us, he can help us to see people as he does. Jesus didn't see a Samaritan, a foreigner, a heretic, or even a woman (in the way men of his day did), he saw a child of God, precious in God's sight, who was broken, perhaps a bit embarrassed and ashamed of the messy life she led. And he spoke to the person inside.

In a few minutes, we'll baptise Paige, praying for God's spirit to live in her. Baptism doesn't force that on to her, but it is a sign and symbol of that gift. May Paige always know that God is there for her, and that wherever she is, and in whatever circumstances she finds herself, she is still his child. May we always see that God-given humanity in her – even if she's naughty as a kid, or makes choices we find difficult later in life.

And may we never fall for the lie of prejudice – the mindset that values people according to how much they are like us. Whoever we meet, whatever their circumstances, and whatever labels are put on them by others, may we see each person as made in God's image, with all the humanity, potential and possibilities that places in them.