

### The Samaritan Woman

A sermon by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the second Sunday in Lent, March 10, 1996. Scripture Lessons: Exodus 17:1-7; Psalm 95; Romans 5:1-11; John 4:5-42.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

We preachers are too inclined to deal in abstractions. We too often give lectures in theology rather than introduce people to Jesus. So we may give the impression that Christianity is an idea rather than a personal encounter with Jesus Christ that calls for a daily decision for or against him. But the Bible doesn't talk in abstractions. It's crammed with stories about real people.

I want to speak today about a particular encounter described in St. John's Gospel. I hope all of us will find ourselves drawn into this conversation that takes place between Jesus and a woman of Samaria. I believe that real, living Christian faith for us begins and continues with this kind of conversation with Christ.

Jesus, tired out after a long walk over the hills from Judaea, is sitting by a well in Samaria. "The disciples had gone away to the town to buy food. Meanwhile a Samaritan woman came to draw water. Jesus said to her, 'Give me a drink.'" That's how the story begins. Already there's an element of surprise. In those days a man didn't open up a casual conversation with a woman. And the last thing this woman expected when she set out to the well was to find herself talking about God. So we discover right away that Christ ignores the difference between the sexes when he has something to say to us. We discover also that we may find him talking to us when we didn't have the slightest intention of doing anything religious at all. The

woman had casually gone out to the well, just as someone might casually switch on a radio - then, suddenly Christ is there, talking.

"Give me a drink." He begins with a request. He doesn't say: "Sister, are you saved?" There are people today whose first contact with Christ comes almost unnoticed by their doing something for him. They give time or money to feed the hungry, relieve the prisoners, send warm blankets to the cold, and medicines to the sick. And Christ says: "Inasmuch as you've done it unto one of the least of these my brothers and sisters, you've done it unto me." The conversation has begun.

Then comes the first defense we put up too keep us from close contact with Christ. The woman abruptly raises what we ~~call the "racial issue"~~. "What! You, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a Samaritan woman?" Racism is an ugly thing. It's poisoned human relationships throughout history. This woman simply expected that Jesus would share the prejudice that makes one group dislike, distrust, and despise another for no other reason than the accident of birth, their nationality, or the color of their skin. Jesus completely ignores the distinction and goes straight to the central point - what he has to offer to every man, woman, or child of any race whatever. "If only you knew what God gives, and who it is that's asking you for a drink, you would've asked him and he would've given you living water."

The woman's curiosity is aroused. If she only knew? Who is this? What does he mean by living water? She's at the questioning stage many of us go through in our encounter with

Christ. Who is he? That's the question we always have to ask. "Are you a greater man than Jacob our ancestor?" she asks. Jesus doesn't go into the theological problem. He simply says: "Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water that I shall give him will never suffer thirst any more. The water that I shall give will be an inner spring welling up for eternal life."

What do you make of these words? I think this woman at least sensed that Jesus had a tremendous gift for her that would change her life. But she wasn't ready yet to have her life changed. So she falls back on another line of defense. She tries to give this conversation a flippant turn. "Sir, give me that water, and then I won't be thirsty, nor have to come all this way to draw." She tries to make his offer of divine life seem like a magic trick, pretending to take him literally. Anyone can grab hold of a religious expression and make it sound like nonsense. This is one of the ways we try to distance ourselves from a closer relationship with the Risen Christ.

Then Jesus gives the conversation a totally unexpected turn. "Go home, call your husband and come back." She's startled. Why this sudden intrusion into her personal life. She stalls. "I have no husband." And Jesus said: "You're right. You've had five husbands and the man you're now living with isn't your husband." Now the real trouble was out in the open. What needed sorting out was not a theological but a moral problem. A conversation with Christ is often not so much a mental struggle

in which we try to come to terms with his unique claims, as a moral struggle.

She tries one more diversion. She raises the denominational issue. "Sir," she replied, "I can see that you're a prophet. Our fathers worshipped on this mountain, but you Jews say that the temple where God should be worshipped is in Jerusalem." This was an old point of contention between the Jews and the Samaritans - the correct location of the Temple. How easy it is to get involved in foolish denominational arguments. The woman tries to get Jesus into a denominational argument in order to avoid religious decision.

But Jesus isn't so easily diverted. He knows her need. He wants her to know his Father and this inner spiritual power that he alone can give. "Believe me," he said, "the time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain, nor in Jerusalem. The time approaches, indeed it's already here, when real worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and in truth."

Isn't it strange to think that this profound teaching that's echoed through the centuries was first given in a casual conversation with an apparently irreligious and immoral woman by the side of a well? That's how it so often is with Christ. He talks to each one of us just as we are. We don't need any theological training, we don't need to clean ourselves up, we don't need to be religious people before we meet God in Christ.

The conversation comes to its climax. The woman answered: "I know that the Messiah is coming. When he comes he'll tell us everything." Jesus said, "I who am speaking to you am he."

He says that to us. "I am he" - "I'm the one you've been looking for, the one who brings God to you, the one who brings you to God, the one who gives direction to your life, the one who sorts out the moral confusion, the one who has a job for you to do." "I am he."

This woman was so overwhelmed with her discovery that she did what many of us are scared to do. She went right back to the town where everybody knew her and told them about Christ. And "many Samaritans of that town came to believe in him because of the woman's testimony." And then it goes on: "Many more became believers because of what they heard from his own lips. They told the woman, 'It's no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we've heard him ourselves; and we know that this is in truth the Saviour of the world.'"

This is where we come in. We've been overhearing this conversation at the well. But at the same time we've had our own conversation with Christ. Most of us have had some kind of second-hand knowledge of Christ - through our parents, our friends, our teachers, our church. What matters is that we can reach the point of saying: "It's no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we've heard him ourselves; and we know that this is in truth the Saviour of the world." It's not an idea that we're confronted with. It's a person. And he asks us, knowing us as intimately as he knew that woman at the well, "Who do you say that I am?" Faith begins and faith grows when we reply, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."

O God the fountain of life, to a humanity parched with thirst you offer the living water of grace which springs up from the rock, our savior Jesus Christ. Grant your people the gift of your Spirit, that we may learn to profess our faith with courage and announce with joy the wonder of your love. We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with you in the Father and the Spirit, one God, forever and ever. Amen.