

Encounter with Jesus – The Samaritan Woman

In these services we are looking at people who have had an encounter with Jesus, in the Old Testament, the New Testament, in history or the present day, and the effect the encounter had on them. Last time we looked at Nicodemus, a member of the Jewish Sanhedrin, and tonight we are going to the other end of society to look at the Samaritan Woman at the well. Hilary is going to read us the story.

[Readings Jn 4:5-30; 39-42]

Who was the Samaritan Woman?

We don't know her name, or what became of her later, but she is remembered in history for this one encounter. That she came to the well alone at noon, rather than in the company of other women when it was cooler, probably indicates that the rest of the women of Sychar did not like her, in this case because of her sexual activities. She had been married five times and is not married to the man she is living with now. Samaritans were no less pious and strict than Jews, and her behaviour would have resulted in being ostracised from the Samaritan religious community—which would have been nearly the whole town.

How did she encounter Jesus?

Although Jewish teachers warned against talking much with women in general, they would have especially avoided Samaritan women, who, they declared, were unclean from birth. Other ancient accounts show that even asking for a drink of water from a woman could be interpreted as flirting with her - especially if she had come alone due to a reputation for loose morals. Jesus breaks all the rules of Jewish piety and social behaviour here. He deliberately starts a conversation with a Samaritan woman when they are alone – the Jewish equivalent of a modern tabloid paper would probably have carried headlines like “JESUS PROPOSITIONS A PROSTITUTE”. When the Canaanite woman came to Jesus and asked him to heal her daughter (Mt 15:22-28) he initially would have nothing to do with her and said he had only come to “the lost sheep of Israel”, yet here he deliberately initiates the conversation. The Samaritan woman was only coming for water and had no idea who Jesus was – so it was for her a chance encounter with Jesus. For him it seems it was a deliberate contact to address her lifestyle and offer her the chance of salvation. He is still looking for opportunities to meet people and give them that chance.

What happened during the encounter?

The woman first confronts this encounter with a stranger in racial terms: she knew that under Jewish law, even her water vessel was considered unclean for Jewish drinking. Ironically, in John's Gospel only non-Jews recognize Jesus' Jewishness (here and Pilate at Jesus trial [Joh 18:33-35](#)). Jesus then changes the conversation to spiritual matters by telling her he can give her “living water”. Jesus has no jar to lower into the well; moreover, even with a jar he could not get “living” (i.e., fresh or flowing) water from a well. The images of water and wells were often used symbolically at the time; but like many other characters in John, she takes Jesus literally when he is speaking figuratively.

Her response is actually quite rude – almost “who do you think you are?”. Saying “our father Jacob” is an affront to the Jewish teaching that the Jewish people were children of Jacob. The Samaritans were at best mixed race, they had been brought to the land and settled in the towns of Samaria (hence Samaritans) from Babylon and other parts of the Assyrian empire by the King of Assyria when he moved most of the Israelites of the Northern Kingdom into exile. Jesus, who is greater than Jacob, does not argue the point with her; it is not relevant to the issue he wishes to drive home. He offers her the water of eternal life, but again she doesn't understand the full meaning. Jesus then tells her to fetch her husband, knowing this will force her to admit she doesn't have one.

In view of the potential ambiguity of the situation we discussed earlier, her statement, “I have no husband,” could mean “I am available.” Jesus removes any possible double meaning: she had been married five times and is not married to the man she now lives with. He also removes the ambiguity about the water he is talking about by demonstrating his knowledge of her situation. She now recognises him as a prophet because he knows things about her no stranger could have known.

Prophets were considered capable of knowing others’ thoughts. Although this frequent description of Jesus is inadequate, because he is God, it at least moves the conversation beyond her simple statement that she has no husband. The Samaritans were waiting not for any prophet, however, but the greatest prophet, one like Moses. The woman now challenges Jesus about the Jewish insistence that God can only truly be worshipped at the Temple in Jerusalem. (Remember that women would not normally be allowed to speak to strangers, let alone enter into debate with them – so she is quite self confident.)

Mount Gerizim, the Samaritans’ holy site equivalent to Judaism’s Jerusalem, was in full view of Jacob’s well and she probably pointed to it as she spoke. She uses the past tense for “worship” precisely because of her continuing understanding of the racial separation between Jews’ and Samaritans’: roughly two centuries before, the Jewish king had obliterated the Samaritan temple on that mountain, and it had remained in ruins ever since. Samaritans mocked the Jewish holy site and once, under cover of darkness, even sought to defile the Jerusalem temple. Jews similarly ridiculed Mount Gerizim and even built many of their synagogues so worshipers could face Jerusalem, as Mosques are today. Jesus responds with “A time is coming”, which was common prophetic language and because she has accepted him as a prophet, she has to listen to his message.

Jesus is not neutral here; he states that salvation is from the Jews, but he does not allow that to remain as a barrier to anyone coming to salvation. When he speaks of “worship in Spirit and truth,” he may have been referring to the common view in Judaism that prophecy was linked with the Spirit, as well as Old Testament passages about charismatic, prophetic worship. Given the general belief at the time that the Spirit was no longer speaking, since there had been a gap of about 400 years since the last recognised prophet, Jesus’ words would strike people very forcefully. The future time Jesus is referring to is in the present as well; Jesus says it “has now come”. Jesus makes the nature of the future world (heaven) available to his disciples in their present lives. For oppressed Jews and Samaritans longing for the future promise of a Messiah or Saviour, this was also a striking statement, which the woman responds to by saying that when he comes the Messiah will explain everything. Then Jesus tells her openly that he is the Messiah – something he does not do to Jews or even the Disciples until they recognise him as such.

What effect did the encounter have on the Samaritan Woman?

The immediate effect was for her to leave her water jar at the well and return to the town to tell the people about the encounter and that Jesus could be the Messiah. Judaism did not have much regard for the witness of a woman, and the witness of an adulteress would be worthless; the situation was probably the same among the Samaritans. Nevertheless, she witnesses in the same way Philip had to Nathaniel when he had met Jesus - “come and see”. That she is distracted from her original purpose for coming to the well and leaves behind her water pot suggests that Jesus’ spiritual water has replaced the water of Jacob’s well for her.

The Samaritans believe because they meet Jesus, but the woman’s relationship to her community also changes through her having become his first witness there. Through her actions the community is changed and people come to know Jesus as the Messiah.

For Jesus to lodge there, eating Samaritan food and teaching Samaritans would be roughly equivalent to defying segregation in the United States during the 1950s or apartheid in South Africa in the 1980s—shocking, extremely difficult, somewhat dangerous. The Jesus of the

Gospels is more concerned with people than with customs. It is also interesting that the same disciples who were with him at the time continued to restrict the spread of the gospel to only Jews until Peter has the encounter with the Holy Spirit in Cornelius' house.

Discussion – Discuss in your groups for about 5 minutes what we can learn from the Samaritan Woman's' encounter with Jesus and how we can apply it in our lives. We'll then have a short feedback from each group.