Christ the Living Water
John 4:1-42

We're looking at John's gospel, one of the four accounts of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. And back in chapter 3, a man called Nicodemus came to see Jesus, at night. And he was the archetypal insider. He was educated, respectable and a man with a reputation to lose. Today, we meet someone very different - the ultimate outsider. A woman whose reputation is already in tatters. And Nicodemus comes at night, but we meet this woman in the heat of the day.

And yet, what John wants to show us is that Jesus has come for both. Which means he's come for you. You see, Nicodemus tells us that it doesn't matter how good you are, or how together your life seems, you still need God's grace. But this woman tells us is that it doesn't matter how bad you are, or the wreckage you've made of your life, none of us are beyond that grace.

You see, ultimately, this account isn't really about the woman at the well, it's about the man she meets there. So we're going to look at 4 things: The Weakness of Christ, the Compassion of Christ, the Insight of Christ, and the Wonder of Christ.

The Weakness of Christ
Look at v1: 'Now when Jesus learned that the Pharisees had heard that Jesus was making and baptising more disciples than John… he left Judea.' So Jesus' ministry is taking off. There's a buzz and excitement about him. So this is the time to invest in that. Get on TikTok, post on the Gram, hand out some flyers, put up some posters, promote yourself Jesus: we are building a movement!

But Jesus does the opposite. He heads for the exit. Why? Because 'the Pharisees had heard.' Because as interest in him grows so does opposition. Just think about that. John opened this gospel by telling us that Jesus is the Word of God and the Son of God. His power is absolute. He just needs to speak the word and any opponents would cease to be.

But he doesn't. He's humbled himself. And the One who made all things and gives breath to all things, has come as a man, and made himself vulnerable - to attack and opposition. And so, for the time being, he withdraws - back to Galilee.

But look at the route he takes, v4, 'He had to pass through Samaria.' And around 700BC, when Assyria invaded the northern kingdom of Israel, they deported the population and resettled it with gentile pagans, bringing their pagan gods with them, and intermarring with what remained of the Israelites. So that whole northern region, Samaria, if you were Jewish, was religiously and ethnically tainted.

And that's where Jesus heads. And they reach Sychar, and v6, 'Jacob's well was there; so Jesus, wearied as he was from his journey, was sitting beside the well.'

So it's not just that Jesus has humbled himself to the point where he can be threatened. It's that the One who made all things becomes tired. And the one whose strength is limitless, the one who gives rest to the weary, has to sit down, weary and thirsty.

Now, do you ever get to the end of the day and feel beaten up and exhausted - by life, work, or kids? Or does it ever feel like you've got people who are against you and whatever you do is not enough and it's tiring? Well, look at Jesus sat down and weary, and know: he understands.

And yet, there's no self-pity. As the writer to the Hebrews says, 'we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathise with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin' (Heb 4:15).

And so as we see him sat down, we can know what Augustine said is true, that 'Christ made us in his power; but he comes to find us in his weakness.'

The Compassion of Christ

Recently we went on holiday to Sicily. And one afternoon, my two sons-in-law and I went for a run. And it was hot. And we did not see a single person. What we did see were dogs. Because every house we ran past seemed to have at least two ferocious, snarling, guard dogs. And each time, the only thing between us and them was a fence. And this was Italy, so you can imagine the condition of the fences. It was not the most relaxing of runs. And as we were running I was reminded of that Noel Coward song: 'Only mad dogs and Englishmen, go out in the midday sun.'

Mad dogs, Englishmen, their German sons-in-law, and women who don't want to be seen. Women who don't want to meet anyone else.

Because as Jesus sits down at the well, John tells us, v6, 'It was about the sixth hour.' Midday. And typically women would come to a well like this as a group, early in the morning, or late in the evening, to avoid the heat of the day. But, v7, 'A woman from Samaria came to draw water.'

So she's coming at a time when she can be sure she won't meet any other women. Because they probably don't want to meet her. They've seen how many men she's gone through and they don't want their man to be the next.

But if there are no other women at the well, there is a man, and Jesus says to her, v7, "Give me a drink." Look at her response, v9: 'The Samaritan woman said to him, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask for a drink from me, a woman of Samaria?" You see, she is as unlike Nicodemus as it is possible to be. He was a Jew, she's a Samaritan. He's a man, she's a woman in a patriarchal society. He's of impeccable character and reputation, and she's an outcast among outcasts.

And yet, Jesus talks to her. And he doesn't just talk, he asks her to do something for him. He treats her - a woman who everyone else shuns - with dignity.

Now, are you closer, morally, to Nicodemus or to her? Whichever it is, the truth is we are all, by nature, outsiders to God, foreigners to his people. But as Jesus engages her it tells us, it's for just such people like her, and like us, that Christ has come.

Because, it's not just that he talks to her, or even asks of her, it's that he *offers* her. Verse 10, "If you knew *the gift of God*, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water."

Every other man has probably taken from her. And as a result, here she is, alone, and exposed in the heat. But Jesus offers her a gift. And she doesn't have to earn it, or debase herself for it. And he calls it 'living water'. Which she does not understand! Verse 11, 'The woman said to him, "Sir, you have nothing to draw water with, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? Are you greater than our father Jacob?"' who dug this well.

And the answer is, yes, he is, infinitely greater. You see, this well still exists, and archeologists say that in Jesus' day it was likely up to 30m deep. So the woman has a point. Jesus has no bucket and no water to offer. But he's not talking about water from this well, is he? He's talking about something that will quench her thirst on the inside.

Verses 13-14, 'Jesus said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again."'

Now when you're out hiking and it's hot and you're sweating and you come across one of those water fountains and there is crystal clear water pouring out of the spout, it tastes good.

And that's what Jesus is offering this woman. Not water from a spout, but the kind of water that will quench the thirst of her dry and weary soul.

I mean, she knows she's thirsty - she just doesn't know for what: v15,"Sir, give me this water, so that I will not be thirsty or have to come here to draw water." So Jesus is not the only one who's tired. She's also tired - tired of the shame this well signifies.

And the thing is, we're all like her. We're all thirsty on the inside, we're all looking for something to give us life or quench the thirst for love, or acceptance, for meaning or significance, or for something to fill the void left by shame or self-loathing.

The problem is, like her, we can try and quench that thirst in all the wrong places.

500 years before this, the Lord said though Jeremiah the prophet, "My people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, the fountain of living waters, and hewed out cisterns for themselves, broken cisterns *that can hold no water"* (Jer 2:13). In other words, everyone's thirsty, and only God can truly satisfy that thirst. Everywhere else we look is like a water tank, that leaks. It might satisfy for a bit, but before long it fails.

And Jesus is saying to this woman, and to us, 'but I can give you something that will never fail'. But, like this woman, you have to see your need.

The Insight of Christ
The woman tells Jesus that she'll take this water he's offering, and he says, v16, "Go, call your husband, and come here."

He knows her, doesn't he? He knows her better than she knows herself. He knows how she has been trying to quench her thirst. She's been searching for life and seeking it in one relationship after another. Verse 17, 'The woman answered him, "I have no husband." Jesus said to her, "You are right… you have had five husbands, and the one you now have is not your husband."

And she's sought in husbands, and lovers, and sex, and intimacy what only God can give her. She's made the fatal exchange that Paul says in Romans 1 we're all guilty of: of looking to the created to fulfil us, not the Creator. As Paul Tripp, the American pastor and author, writes, you either search for life vertically - with God - or horizontally: in stuff, or other people. But it's only in the vertical that you'll truly find what you're looking for.

Because, sure, a long list of husbands or wives may not be your thing, but as Augustine pointed out, while we may not have 5 husbands, but we do have 5 senses. And we are thirsty for life and we can try and quench that thirst through what we look at, or listen to, or touch, or taste, or smell - through beauty or pleasure or romance or music. But it's only the Creator, not the created, who can truly quench that thirst.

Drink at the wrong fountain and it's like drinking salt water: it leaves you more thirsty than ever.

And so, Jesus does not bring her past into the light to humiliate her but to help her see where she's been drinking. You see, we might wish we didn't have to confront stuff, but we'll never experience the depth of life Christ offers, until we've faced our broken cisterns.

So look how she responds, v19-20: "Sir, I perceive that you are a prophet. Our fathers worshipped on this mountain, but you say that in Jerusalem is the place where people ought to worship." Is she being defensive, like the man I spoke to recently, who, when I probed about what his relationship with Jesus was actually like, kept trying to talk about Jordan Peterson? And is she trying to shift attention away from her private life because, 'if I can just get Jesus to debate theology he'll stop asking me awkward questions'?

Or, is this issue of where and how you should worship the red button religious issue for her?

We don't know, but either way, Jesus goes with her, and tells her, which mountain you worship on is a dead issue because, with his coming, everything has changed.

You see, it's not just that he knows *her*, it's that, he knows his Father, and the type or worshipper his Father is seeking.

Verse 23, "The hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him."

So it's not just that we're all thirsty, it's that we're all worshippers. And it's not just that we're prone to look to broken cisterns, it's that we're prone to make idols.

Want to know that you are significant and loved, and look for that in others, and you'll be in danger of making some romantic relationship the most important thing for you. And one problem with that, as the Bible makes clear, is that you become like what you worship. Worship the emotion of love and being in love and you'll become as unstable as your emotions. Worship power and control, and you'll become aggressive and defensive. Worship pleasure - always looking ahead to the next great trip or adventure - and you'll become as ephemeral and untrustworthy as the pleasure you pursue, as you flit from one thing to the next.

Instead, Jesus says, the Father is seeking you to worship him. Now, is that just egotistical? No! Because we're all going to worship something. There's always going to be something you live for, sacrifice for, give yourself for, look to for your security and identity, and consider the most beautiful. And that thing should be the most beautiful, trustworthy, powerful, valuable, secure thing in the universe. Because if it's not, you're making a second rate thing the first rate thing in your life,

which makes zero sense. But worship God and you get *the* ultimate thing of first-rate, *and* you get joy and peace thrown in for free.

So true worship, Jesus says, is not about this religious shrine or that sacred mountain. It's not about this ritual, or that ethnic identity. Instead, with Christ's coming, true worship is in spirit because God is Spirit. And because, as Jesus said to Nicodemus, if you want to enter God's kingdom, and truly live, you must be born again of the Spirit. And it's worship in truth - because we must worship God, as he really is, and not an idol of our own making.

But thirdly, Jesus knows himself. You see, the woman hears Jesus out and says, v25-26, '"I know that Messiah is coming (he who is called Christ). When he comes, he will tell us all things." Jesus said to her, "I who speak to you am he."'

Now, back in chapter 3, John the Baptist told his disciples, 'I am not the Christ' - I am not the messiah. But here is Jesus saying, but I am. And Messiah in Hebrew, and Christ in Greek, mean, the Anointed One. The great and ultimate king. And this woman is looking for that king to come because he'll have all the answers. And Jesus is sat beside her, saying, I've come.

You see, when Jesus says to her, "I who speak to you am he." What he actually says is, '*I am*, the one speaking to you.' And in John's gospel, when Jesus says, *I am*, you're supposed to hear the echoes of God revealing his name to Moses: *I AM WHO I AM*.

So it's not just that Jesus can quench your thirst, or tell you how you should worship. It's that he's to become the object of your worship.

The Wonder of Christ

And the disciples return, and John tells us, v28-30, 'The woman left her water jar and went away into town and said to the people, "*Come, see a man who told me all that I ever did*. Can this be the Christ?" [Ands John adds:] They went out of the town and were coming to him.'

And as Jesus sees them coming, he says to the disciples, v35, "Look, I tell you, lift up your eyes, and see that the fields are white for harvest."

Don't you think it's ironic? This woman who was ostracised becomes the most effective evangelist in John's gospel. As John says in v39, 'Many Samaritans from that town believed in him because of the woman's testimony, "He told me all that I ever did."'

What makes her so effective?

You see, we're surrounded by people who are thirsty, aren't we? At school, on campus, at work, among our neighbours. So how can we be as effective at bringing them to Jesus as she was?

Well, firstly, she leaves her bucket. It's like a symbol of her old life, isn't it. And if you want to be an effective witness for Christ, you can't have one foot in both camps. You've got to decide, 'I'm breaking up with the world and all this other stuff I've been looking to to satisfy me, and I'm siding with Jesus.'

Secondly, she goes and tells them about Jesus. She just opens her mouth. And her theology is probably all over the place, but she's pointing them to the right place. And we can worry that we might say the wrong things or have none of the right answers. But she almost certainly said lots of wrong things and probably had none of the right answers. But what she did have was the reality of her encounter with Jesus and the willingness to talk about it.

On my first weekend at university, I was sat having a cup of tea with two other students who I'd just met and were also new. And I'd been a Christian for about 18 months, and was telling them about how I'd become one. And it turned out one of the others was also a Christian. So I turned to the third, who was a medical student like me, and stupidly, in my naivety, just assumed she was also a Christian, so asked her, 'So Maria, how did you become a Christian?' And she started to cry and said, 'I don't think I am one'. Now, four daughters later, I've got a bit better at handling crying girls, but back then, I had no idea! But no exaggeration, in what must have been incredibly clumsy ways, I explained to Maria how to became a Christian and there and then she was converted and 35 years later is a consultant anaesthetist and still walking with the Lord and serving in her local church. And literally all I did was tell her how I became a Christian and ask her a single, awkward question.

Now, sadly, the rest of my time at Uni was not quite so fruitful, but when Jesus says to the disciples in v38, "I sent you to reap that for which you did not labour" he meant it. And you might be the last link in the chain, or the first. But to be a link, we've just got to speak.

But thirdly, she's honest about the mess of her life. 'He told me everything I ever did.' You see, our job is not to pretend we have it all together. It's to point to the one who holds it all together. We are not the messiah. Jesus is.

And in v42, the townspeople say to the woman, "It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is indeed the Saviour of the world."

And in their day, pagan gods and Roman emperors were called saviours of the world. But neither idols nor political leaders can ultimately save us, any more than they can quench our thirst. Instead, look what Jesus says in v34, "My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to accomplish his work." And later on in John's gospel, on the night he was betrayed, Jesus prays, 'Father, I have glorified you, I have finished the work you gave me to do.' What was that work? It was to save the world by dying for the world.

And at his trial the king, the Messiah, was handed over to his opponents, and crowned with thorns, so that we might become his friends; and at the cross he thirsted again, that our thirst might be quenched. And he became weak that we might become strong. And he died that we might live. Because it's through his work that we can find rest. Because through his death and resurrection he has opened up a fountain of life that we can drink from.

So, if you're already a Christian, drink again from that fountain, and let his waters flow from you to others. And if you're not yet a Christian, come, and drink.