The Woman at the Well
John 4:1-30; 39-42

Over the summer we've been looking at some of the stories of men and women whose lives were upended by meeting Jesus. And today we're finishing with this account of the woman at the well. And as we do, we're going to look at 4 things: the humanity of Jesus, the thirst for Jesus; the directness (and gentleness) of Jesus and finally at the life changing power of Jesus.

The Humanity of Jesus
Now, one of the markers of our current culture is the desire for authenticity. The desire to be you, unencumbered by what anyone tries to make you. And you've got to take that true, inner you, the authentic you, and express it to the world. And nowhere is that more clearly seen that in the area of sexual identity.

But what's strange is that desire for authenticity sits alongside a celebrity, Instagram culture, where people present a highly filtered and photoshopped image of their life - and that's anything but authentic.

But if you think about it, that projection of an image to make you look good is nothing new, is it? In ancient Rome, a conquering general might wait outside of Rome for months after retuning in victory, waiting for just the right moment to enter the city in triumphal procession, so he could project the image of a truly great man.

And that's what makes what John writes here all the more remarkable. Verse 6, 'Jesus, *wearied as he was* from his journey, was sitting beside the well.' Now, of all the gospel writers, John is the one who upfront makes the claim that Jesus was and is God. He opens with it: 'In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God, and the Word was God' (John 1:1). So you can have your victorious generals with their parades, or your Instagram celebrities with their carefully curated image, but when it comes to truly great men, John wants you to know that Jesus exceeded them. He's God.

And yet, here is John saying Jesus was 'weary'. Now what is Jesus doing being weary? I thought he was supposed to be God! And you can't have God suddenly getting all faint. Sure, but Jesus was also a man, John tells us. A real, authentic human man. And that matters. You see, you and I are continually tempted to make God in our image. And we imagine God to be just like us. And he approves of what I approve of, and condemns what I condemn, and he likes the people I like and he doesn't like the people I don't like.

But then Jesus comes and says, 'Listen, if you really want to know what God is like, don't look at yourself, at your personal preferences, look at me, I'm the image of God. You've got to allow me to be the one who determines your view of God.'

And yet, there is a sense in which Jesus is like us because he was weary. And you almost certainly know what that feels like. When you're tired, bone tired, sat-down-tired, like Jesus here. So tired his disciples leave him and go get food for him. And given the heat, not just tired, but thirsty and, in all likelihood, hot and sweaty and dirty. It's hardly an Instagram photo, is it?

But that's why Christianity is so unique. You see, every other religion will either give you a great man - a great prophet or teacher, a great moral example you've got to aspire to be like, *or* it'll give you an out of reach God. But Christianity gives you something very different: A God who doesn't just know *theoretically* what it is to be human, but who knows it by lived experience.

The writer to the Hebrews says that in Jesus we have a High Priest who is able 'to sympathise with our weaknesses' (Heb 4:15). You know, one of the criticisms levelled against Jesus was that he was a friend of tax-collectors and sinners. But how would you define a friend? Isn't a friend someone who understands you? Who knows what you're going through? And the Bible tells you, Christ is your friend - the God who truly understands you.

JC Ryle, the Bishop of Liverpool, wrote about this verse, that Jesus, God become man, could be weary and said of Jesus: 'Power and sympathy are marvellously combined in him… Here is rest for the Weary! Here is Good News!' In other words, it's in Jesus, the Son of God, being weary, it's in his need for rest, that you can find rest. Why? Because it tells you that he was a man like you, but a perfect man, the God-Man, able to perfectly represent you before God.

But first, you've got to know that you need him.

The Thirst for Jesus

So Jesus is sat at the well and he's joined by a woman. Verse 7, 'A woman from Samaria came to draw water.' Now, this story follows on the heels of Nicodemus meeting with Jesus in John 3, the previous chapter. And Nicodemus and this woman could not be more different. Nicodemus, was at the top of the social pecking order, he was the kind of guy you'd be honoured to have as a neighbour - but this woman is right at the bottom. Nicodemus was a man, she's a woman in a patriarchal society. Nicodemus was a Jew, she's a Samaritan - a despised ethnic group. Nicodemus was a member of the ruling class, honoured by society. This woman comes to the well alone and, John tell us, 'It was about the sixth hour' (v6)

That's 12 noon. Nicodemus meets Jesus in the dead of night, she meets him in the heat of the day. Think about that. What's she doing getting water then? Because typically, women would go and collect water first thing in the morning or in the cool of the evening, and they'd go together. It was a social event - it was like the school gate. But this woman goes alone at midday. Why?

Well, never let it be said that I agree with Sigmund Freud on anything, but Freud said that cultures and societies are defined by what they forbid. And in a traditional culture, like this woman's, sexual sin was most definitely forbidden. And she comes alone because she has been shunned by her neighbours. Because of her sexual, relational history she is an outcast amongst outcasts. She is excluded and ostracised.

In his book, T*he Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*, Carl Truman, Professor of history at Grove City College, writes 'The desire to be recognised, to be accepted, to belong is a deep and perennial human need.'[1] You almost certainly know that for yourself. And yet this woman was none of those. She's not recognised or accepted and she doesn't belong. It's midday but she might as well be invisible as she moves through the shadows of her community.

[1] p70

And if it was just that she was a woman and a Samaritan there would have been cultural reason enough for Jesus to ignore her. But he doesn't. He does the opposite. He asks something of her. He asks *her* to do *him* a favour. Verse 7, 'Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink."'

Now, she knows that he's stepped over a boundary: v9, 'The Samaritan woman said to him, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask for a drink from me, a woman of Samaria?"' I mean, hello, I'm a woman, a Samaritan woman - you're not supposed to be talking to me. You do know who I am don't you?

And Jesus knows who she is far more than she even begins to realise. Verse 10, 'Jesus answered her, "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."'

How did her neighbours, her culture, see her? As a sinner to be shunned. How would our current culture see her? As a victim - a victim of male oppression and/or as a woman with every right to be her authentic self, to live out her sexual desires regardless of what the oppressive culture around her says. How does Jesus see her? He sees her as she is, as someone who is thirsty. A woman who has gone from relationship to relationship, hoping that through love and sex and romance - through a man in her life - she can find that which will satisfy her. But where's it led her? To a relational desert, like a non-person, walking alone to a well in the heat of the day. Relationship after relationship promised her: this is the one! This will quench your thirst. And years down the line her soul is parched.

And Jesus says, 'if you only knew the gift of God - if you only knew God's grace and who I am, and what I can give you, you'd know that I can satisfy you beyond anything any man can ever offer you.'

She's gone from man to man looking for something only Christ can give her. Where have you gone? Where are you going? Maybe she thought a man would offer her security in a world where women are vulnerable. Where do you look for security? 'I feel secure if…' what comes after 'if'? Maybe she thought this next man would make her feel special. Where do you look for that? In the clothes you wear and the nice comments you get? Maybe she thought a man by her side would make her someone. Where do you go to for that? Your career, your research output, your family?

The problem is that the more you look to things other than God to give you an ultimate sense of security or significance, or the sense that you're seen, the drier your soul becomes, because you stop enjoying those things for what they are, and you using them and putting weight on them they can never bear. You think having a perfect family will do it, and so you'll put pressure on your kids which will end up breaking them and you. You think your career will do it, but in your drive for success you can sacrifice the things that really matter and if you fail you'll be devastated. Either way, you can find yourself standing alone beside the water cooler, the office well, because of the way you've treated people along the way.

Ok, but look how she answers. Verses 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?"' Now, notice what she's doing. Because it's what we all do. She thinks in terms of the material. Jesus is talking about her inner thirst - for meaning and love and security and acceptance, and she still thinks stuff - the water in this well for her, or possessions, position, prestige for us, will quench it.

And Jesus says, v13, “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. The water that I give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.” And when Jesus says that, he’s not just making an offer to this woman, he’s making a claim about himself: if only you knew who I am.

You see, in the Old Testament, through the prophet Jeremiah, God diagnosed the problem of the people: “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, God’s the well, God’s the only fountain of water that can ever satisfy us, but we’ve turned from him and tried to quench our thirst at all these other wells. And here is Jesus saying. I’m the well. I’m the fountain. I’m the God of living waters. Come to me and drink.

And the woman’s response? Verse 15, “Sir, give me this water, so that I will not be thirsty or have to come here to draw water.” Now, is she still thinking in terms of physical thirst and liquid water? Maybe. But why does she want what Jesus is offering? ‘So I don’t have to come here to draw water.’ I want to be rid of this daily reminder of my shame.

But for that to happen, Jesus has some unfinished business with her heart.

The Directness (and gentleness) of Jesus
Verse 16, ‘Jesus said to her, “Go call your husband, and come here.”’

Now what has he just gone and done? He’s beginning to peel back the layers of her heart. He’s letting her know he knows her and sees inside her. But in doing that, he’s helping her see herself and confront herself.

When someone challenges you, how do you respond? Do you ever find yourself being defensive? Because that’s her initial response: “I have no husband.” And she’s not lying, is she. It’s true. But it’s only partially true. It doesn’t tell the whole story, because she doesn’t want to tell the whole story. Verse 17, ‘Jesus said to her, “You are right in saying, ‘I have no husband’; for you have had five husbands, and the one you now have is not your husband.”’

Now, in our therapeutic age, we’re told that you’re not allowed to make people feel uncomfortable, you’ve got to affirm them in the choices they make - especially in the area of sex and gender. But Jesus doesn’t affirm her, and he does make her feel uncomfortable, but he does it so he can bring healing to her life.

And the same is true for us. Imagine you cut yourself really badly. What would do? You’d probably grab the nearest bit of material and press it on and use it as a bandage and get down to the Emergency Room *prompto*. But what will the doctor do when you get there? She’s going to take your hand off and remove the thing covering the wound. And you might go, ‘please don’t do that.’ Because you know it’s going to hurt. But she can’t help you without first exposing the wound. And if Jesus is to bring real healing to our lives, then there are going to be times, through his word, and his Spirit, through the godly counsel of a friend, when Jesus comes and say, ‘it’s time to deal with this wound and peal back the layers and confront the past and see the wells of stagnant water you’ve been running to’, so that you can find the love and security and identity only Christ can give you.

So, Jesus is direct with her. But he's also gentle. Because as he gets close to her heart she moves beyond defensiveness and tries to make a diversion. She starts talking about the right place to worship. Now, why do that? Is she just trying to get Jesus off her case. He's got a bit too close to home, and she does the ancient equivalent of 'let's change the subject, Jesus what do you think about COVID?' Or is this an issue that matters to her and where Jesus stands on this is going to determine whether she listens to him or not?

We don't know. What we do know is the way Jesus responds to her, v21, 'Jesus said to her, "Woman…"' Now, if one of you ladies asked me a question and I replied, "Woman" it doesn't sound great does it? It sounds harsh, even disrespectful. And yet, Jesus repeatedly does this. He calls his mother 'woman', he calls a Syro-Phoenician woman, 'woman' and he calls the woman who's been bleeding for 12 years 'woman'. Does Jesus have a *woman* problem? No! In fact it's the opposite. Dr Allan Loder, a Greek scholar, has recently searched for all the uses of the word *gunai* which is translated as woman in our Bibles when it's used as a form of address. And outside of the New Testament it only occurs three other times, and all of them are on grave stones. And in each one it's used as a term of affection. Far from it being brusque or harsh, it's used to address one you love. And so he argues that when Jesus uses this word we should translate it 'dear woman' or even 'darling woman'.

So here is this woman, probably trying to deflect Jesus down a theological rabbit hole, and Jesus isn't just direct with her, he's gentle. Dear woman. You know, she has probably gone from man to man hoping this next one will love her, and her true husband, the One who really loves her, is Christ.

Verse 21 and 23, "Woman, [dear woman], believe me, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father… But 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."

Now, how can an hour be coming and yet already be here? That makes no sense, does it. You can't say it's 2pm and it's not yet 2pm, 2pm still to come. Well, in John's gospel, *the hour that's coming* is always linked to Jesus' death and resurrection. And Jesus is saying that when that hour comes, when at the cross the One who knew what it was to be absolutely human, and yet was absolutely perfect, when he gave his life in our place, for her sins and our sins, as our perfect High Priest, that totally changes the way we worship. And in him we can worship our Father in Spirit and truth.

But in Christ, that hour had already come - because He was already in perfect Spirit-and-truth relationship with the Father. And it's that restored relationship with God that he offers to all of us. That just as he knew this woman, he knows you, and loves you and through his death and resurrection forgives you; and so in him you can know your past is dealt with, and you can know him as the one who truly satisfies you.

And when you do, it turns your life on its head.

The Life-changing Power of Jesus

And as the disciples come back with food, did you notice what the woman does? She does three things?

Firstly, v28, '*The woman left her water jar* and went away into town.' Now think about that. Firstly it's one of those unnecessary, eye-witness details that tell you, this really happened. It's got nothing to do with the story, but John was there, he gets back with his friends, finds this woman with Jesus and, as they arrive she heads off, and what he remembers as he watches her go is that she's left her water jar behind! When you read the gospels you can trust them. They're eyewitness testimonies to the life-changing encounters people had with Jesus.

But that water jar standing by the well, forgotten by its owner, tells you something else, doesn't it. The whole point she came to the well with that jar was to get water, and she's gone off without it. Why? Because something else has gripped her heart. Something else has got her attention. Because when you discover, and begin to experience, that Christ is the One who can satisfy your deepest thirst, the things you used to look to to do that begin to find their right place.

But the second thing she does is go and tell her neighbours: v28-9: '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."' And she becomes a witness to Jesus. No evangelistic training. No gospel tract to hand out. No snazzy website. She doesn't go get her teeth whitened and her nails polished. She just tells them about Jesus, and the people come. And they come because of the third thing she does.

She's transparent. Verse 29 again, "Come, see a man who told me all that I ever did." She's honest about the mess of her life. You know, sometimes we can think that we need to get our act together and have it all sorted before God can use us, or before we can talk to our friends or colleagues about Christ. But the gospel isn't good news because it helps good people get better. It's good news because it saves sinners like us, those with broken sexual pasts and presents; those who have made choices that are wrong; those who are proud and hypocritical. And it's the combination of her honesty and her willingness to tell others that makes her such a powerful witness. Because he even loves someone like me.

Paul wrote that God works all things for the good of those who love him. And through the grace of Jesus, even our pasts and presents that we're ashamed of, he will turn for good, not just in our lives, but in the lives of those around us, if we come to him, knowing he's the one who can satisfy our thirst.