

Sermon for Sunday 3rd February, 2019: The woman at the well

+ We joined this evening's reading from John's Gospel at the very end of a long conversation between Jesus and a Samaritan woman at a well. Jesus had told the woman she had had five husbands and the one she was living with now was not her husband. The woman was impressed by his insight, she began to see Jesus in a new light and she said to him, 'Sir, I see that you are a prophet.' As the conversation continued, her understanding increased and finally she left her water jar, went back to the city and said, 'Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done!' The conversation had started when Jesus, tired and thirsty after travelling between Judea and Galilee, stopped at what was known as Jacob's well in Samaria. This was foreign territory to Jesus, a Jew, and it would usually have been avoided; Jews and Samaritans didn't choose to stray into each other's territories and the original hearers would have pricked up their ears in interest at this strange turn of events.

Things were about to get even stranger – not only was Jesus talking with a Samaritan, he was also talking with a woman alone because the disciples had gone to find food. Bit by bit as the conversation unfolds the Samaritan woman learns more and more about Jesus and the 'living water' he promises. The water he speaks of which will become 'a spring of water, gushing up to eternal life'. She becomes convinced that he is the Messiah.

Jacob's well, where Jesus and the woman held this conversation was near the ancient Samaritan city of Sychar. This is now the city of Nablus, in the West Bank and in November whilst on pilgrimage to the Holy Land we visited the same well where Jesus and the Samaritan woman met. It isn't always possible to visit Jacob's well because of the volatile political situation in this region and as we approached the city of Nablus we were warned to move fairly smartly once we got off the coach, as it could be a bit edgy. Reaching the outskirts of the city the poverty of the place became evident. People were begging by the roadside, there was clearly no rubbish disposal at all and as tour leader, sitting on the front seats of the coach, I saw some shocking sights.

The well today is within an Orthodox Church compound behind a high wall, and on the opposite side of the road also behind high walls is a vast refugee camp. As we climbed off our bus it was strangely quiet, very little traffic, very few people. We walked quickly down the street and found an entrance in the wall that surrounded the Church. We went through the door to the other side and the contrast took our breath away. Behind the wall was a garden which couldn't have been more different to the sights we had seen so far around Nablus. It was lush and green with beautiful plants, flowers and bushes. The Church door was open and inside we could see rich decorations and the gold of icons reflecting the sunlight. It turns out that an Orthodox priest, Fr Ioustinos, has made it his life's work to create this oasis around the well, a place which had been familiar to so many figures throughout the Bible. As a Christian he faces great danger, his predecessor had been killed and he lives in daily fear of the same fate. But in the midst of terrible poverty and deprivation, in a part of the world where people were living without hope, Fr Ioustinos had used the precious water from the well to create beauty and to point to something better, to life beyond the present hopeless reality on the other side of the wall.

Nowadays the well is beneath the church and we went down a flight of steps to find it. Two thousand years ago when Jesus was talking about giving the Samaritan women living water, she said to him, 'Sir you have no bucket, and the well is deep.' Nothing has changed and the well is 41 metres, or 135 feet deep. It has a rough surround, made of compacted earth, with a winch and bucket above it. Our group was given a cup of water to pour down and it took several seconds to hit the surface. We were then invited to turn the winch and lower the bucket, which was surprisingly difficult given the depth of the well and the weight of water in the bucket. The water that came up was clear and pure and we all had a drink.

The Samaritan woman was collecting water when she met Jesus, but when she'd heard what he had to say and had been told by him 'I am he, the Messiah, the one who is speaking to you', she abandoned her water jar in her haste to tell others who she had met. One reason Biblical scholars give for this is that she no longer needed the water in the jar, now that she knew about the living water Jesus had told her about. Symbolically this may be the case, but in reality she would still have needed the water from the well because we all do need water to live. The living water Jesus was speaking of was something different, something altogether more mysterious. Life-giving yes, but in a different way.

When all our group had seen the well under the Church in 21st century Nablus, we made our way out of the priest's fragrant, leafy garden. Through the door in the wall word had obviously got around that there were tourists in town and we were mobbed by little boys selling soap. We all jumped as we heard gunfire coming from the refugee camp, quite close to us. The children didn't seem particularly bothered by it and as we hurried to get back on the coach they did a roaring trade, clearly thrilled by the amount of soap we all bought and the change we didn't ask for. This is one of the soaps, wrapped in paper with Arabic writing, a reminder of those children and the life they lead, trapped in a refugee camp and with little hope for the future.

The physical contrast between the grey, dangerous, poverty-stricken camp and the peaceful green Orthodox Church garden couldn't have been greater. And in a spiritual way, I think this is what Jesus was teaching when he spoke of living water, a spring of water gushing up to eternal life. The Orthodox priest Fr Ioustinos used the water from the well to create life, to enable an unpromising patch of earth to flourish; to believe in Jesus Christ is to be prepared to be transformed, to work with God allowing the poverty of our human nature to be moulded and changed in the hope that we might flourish.

Following her encounter with Jesus the Samaritan woman allowed God to work through her. Her life was transformed by what she had seen and heard. She went on to tell everyone she met about her encounter with Jesus and such was her conviction that he was the Messiah that many became believers. She apparently convinced so many people that she has been described as 'equal to the apostles'. Apocryphally she was even given a name, 'Photina' meaning luminous, or enlightened one. And eventually, having attracted the attention of the Emperor Nero, she was hauled before him, tortured and died a martyr after being thrown down a dry well. Photina has become a saint and is celebrated not only in the Orthodox tradition but also in many places across the world. In Mexico for example, her day is marked by churches, schools and businesses who hand out free drinks to passers-by.

Neither Fr Ioustinos nor Photina are names that appear in the Bible, but through their life and work both of them offer us a glimpse of the life that Christ came to bring. The life that is nurtured by the living water of faith. Faith that can transform a barren patch of earth opposite a refugee camp into a green oasis. Faith that led a Samaritan woman to abandon her water jar and tell the world about the one who would give living water, the Messiah. Amen.