

The Woman at the Well

Our Gospel this Sunday narrates the encounter between Jesus and the woman at the well. More than any other, the gospel of John emphasises the primacy of personal encounter with Christ.

This specific encounter however is an unusual one. Firstly, because it is between a man and woman, unknown to one another, and secondly because it takes place in Samaria, an alien territory for Jews in the time of Jesus.

Formerly a region of the Northern Kingdom of Israel, Samaria was captured by Assyrian forces seven centuries before. These overlords had planted the region with non-Jewish peoples who introduced their own religious practices and gradually intermarried with the Jewish population. As a consequence of this intermarrying and religious intermingling, the purity of their Jewish bloodline and worship was judged, by Jews outside of that region, to have been polluted. This encounter between Jesus, a faithful Jew, and an anonymous Samaritan woman, represented an encounter between two peoples who had become estranged by centuries of religious animosity.

Married 5 times and now living with another man, this poor woman was an outcast from respectable society. Tragically unlucky in love, she was forced to carry water in the heat of the midday sun, so that no villager would be there to judge her. Now, face to face with Jesus, she is encountering a man unlike any other. She probably thought however that Jesus would be no different from all the other men she had known, who judged her or took advantage of her.

Rather than taking something from her, Jesus wants to give her something. He wants to quench her thirst with his love, so that she need never thirst again. Initially however the woman does not realise what Jesus is offering her. She thinks he is speaking literally about water. Only gradually does she recognise who Jesus truly is. Not simply a man, or a prophet. Much more even than a Messiah, he is the Saviour of the world.

Rev. Kevin Webb

This encounter is the template for every believer's faith journey. Like the woman, each of us comes to Jesus, full of weakness and sin. And like her, we find in him, neither rejection nor condemnation, but life-giving love. The love of Jesus is the living water that wells up to eternal life for those who respond to his plea, "give me a drink." Jesus thirsts to share his love with us. May we this Lent, quench his thirst.