

Reflection – Jesus and the Woman at the Well

Bible reading: John 4:1-18

Here's a woman who has to go and fetch her water alone, in the heat of the midday sun. All the other women would go together, in the early morning, while it was cool. The only reason to go independently would be if you had some real issues with these other women, or they with you.

And if the issues between you were bad enough to make you take this risk with the water-fetching, then for sure they will show up in other ways too. This woman, we imagine, is living everyday with being excluded, belittled, gossiped about. And you can imagine, or perhaps you know, what that does to her; the defences she has to develop, just to get through everyday life.

But at the well, she can leave all that behind. At the well, she is out of the village; she is away from the other people. At the well, she can drop her defences, and just be herself.

In my sabbatical, part of my reflection on this encounter was through making a piece of art – or rather, a set of 5 pieces – which I'd like to share with you.

I saw the well as being a place where the woman could be her true self. And then it occurred to me that the same was true for Jesus. He spent most of his waking moments surrounded by people – whether that was crowds wanting healing, or his disciples wanting teaching. And all those people had expectations about what he could do, what kind of Messiah he should be. He has to put time and energy into challenging their assumptions, into fending off the pressure to respond a certain way. But here at the well, Jesus is on his own. He's travelling with the disciples; the disciples have gone off into town to buy food. This is one of the rare moments when Jesus has a bit of space, just to be himself.

When Jesus and the woman come to the well, they come alone. They are not expecting to meet anyone, and it may be that they don't at first spot each other. So this is the first part of my reflection.

Sandy background = desert, blue spot = well. The blue spot is the same size in all the pieces. Jesus brownish-green, woman purple. Vertical strips of paper, because they are not relating to each other at this stage.



I've imagined their inner thoughts – and both are exactly the same.

I am TIRED and I am THIRSTY.

At least here I have a few moments of PEACE

away from the VOICES and the LOOKS,

the WORDS and the SILENCES,

that press and push

and press and push

trying to mould me

into the person they think I should be'.

And then, Jesus and the woman see each other. I was going to do the whole sheet again, just turning the strips from vertical to horizontal to indicate a connection. But I decided most of this is just repeating the background, and the key bit is the edge where they meet. It's a straight edge at this point, while they weigh each other up. Again, one set of words for both people, only now the words are in the space between them



'Who are you?
 What are you doing here?
 Why are you alone?
 What do you want from me?
 ...
 (And, after a pause)
 What do I need from you?'

There's an element of fear here, of danger. He could be a rapist; she could be a trap, with a band of robbers hiding round the corner.

But Jesus opens the conversation, and I see them being intrigued with one another. So now the strips cross over the divide, not joining, but interweaving. And this time there is a dialogue.



'Give me a drink.
 Why are you even talking to me?
 I can offer living water.
 I have Jacob as my ancestor
 And I have this well.
 You don't even have a bucket.'

This well will not satisfy your deeper thirst
 I so much want not to have to keep on doing this.

I want to know more.
 I want to know more.'

They get drawn deeper into conversation. Until Jesus says, Go and call your husband, and the woman says, 'I have no husband', and Jesus says, yes, I know, you've had 5 husbands, and now you're living with someone else.

I chose to end the reading here because this, I think, is the crunch moment for the woman. This is her real sore point. Her past, her relationships, are the most likely reason for the coldness of the other women. And this total stranger has just said it out loud. How did he know? This is the moment she could have run. Too scary – too close to home. But because of the level of engagement they are having, because Jesus is treating her with such dignity and respect, because he hasn't let the whole Jewish-Samaritan thing be even an issue between them, she is able to stand her ground. She doesn't run. And the conversation goes even deeper.

So this is the two of them, deeply engaged, and now there is no background at all. Nothing else matters.



The woman's words:
'He sees everything
in my life
and yet
I am not
afraid'.

I found this moment really important. It encouraged me to sit before Jesus with my past, my hurts, my failings – all of it, including those things I wouldn't share with anyone else – and to let Jesus see me as I really am, warts and all. It was deeply uncomfortable. But in not flinching, in not running away, in not distracting myself with being 'busy', I knew myself held in the compassion of Jesus. I hear him say, I love you as you are, not in spite of who you are.

And the thing about that sort of compassion is that it's not saying, everything's fine and there's nothing you need to change. Rather, compassion makes space for me, and for the woman at the well, to say, I don't want to be like this. I want to forgive; I want to repent; I want to own my gifts and my wounds and live as a whole person. It is immensely liberating.

So here is the final piece. In this moment of liberation, in this moment of meeting in real depth, Jesus and the woman have both found new energy, both found living water. Their circling round in dialogue spins out, and they move away from each other full of life – the woman to run back to the village and call all the people who'd ignored her, Jesus to tell his disciples, who come back quite concerned about him, that he's fine. He has food they don't even know about.

'I have food you
do not know about'



'Come and See.
Can this be the
Messiah?'

Looking at this again in the light of our first reading, I wonder if, when Jesus tells his followers to get rid of their stuff, to be ready for action – whether he might be talking not just about sitting light to material goods, but about us letting go of the burdens of your past, as this woman did. So that we too might be more ready to respond to Jesus; ready to receive the living water that he offers.