

**Photina of Nablus:  
Woman at the Well**  
**19 March 2017**  
**Revd Jenny Wilkens**  
*Exodus 17:1-7*  
*John 4:5-42*



[http://www.stlukesinthecity.org.nz/sermons\\_pid\\_22.html](http://www.stlukesinthecity.org.nz/sermons_pid_22.html)

Water has been much in the news lately, whether it's too little in North Canterbury and on our Port Hills or too much in Auckland; whether it's the Whanganui river being accorded the rights of a human being, or decisions about selling off our water from Ashburton or the West Coast to overseas markets. For us in NZ, it might be having rivers and lakes clean enough to swim in; for many in our world the challenge is getting clean and unpolluted water to drink and wash in, water that is accessible and not far distances from home.

I recall on my first trip to Israel/Palestine ten years ago, hearing it said that if there were another World War, it could well not be over access to oil, but to water. Now I am less surprised about that than I was then.

Two of the projects of our Anglican Lent appeal this year are helping children in the West Bank and Gaza who are underweight or disabled. One of the many issues facing their families is access to clean water, both sufficient amounts of it and a continuous supply.

Today we have heard another wonderful dialogue from John's gospel. Last week Jesus' conversation partner was Nicodemus, a fellow Jew, a Pharisee, a respected teacher and leader in his society. Today it is almost the exact opposite – this woman with whom Jesus speaks at such great length is unnamed, she is not Jewish, she is a Samaritan, her lifestyle is perhaps unorthodox. And yet straight away she is contrasted positively with Nicodemus – whereas he came to Jesus by night, she meets him at noon, the time of greatest light, the time when all is revealed, in more ways than one.

Jesus has chosen to travel from Judea to Galilee via Samaria – normally Jews would avoid travelling through Samaritan territory as for centuries they had considered Samaritans as inferior, mixed race, with defective theology and a centre of worship, Mt Gerizim, which had been set up to rival the temple at Jerusalem. There was no love lost between them and sadly and ironically today also many Israelis would not choose to travel through the West Bank either.

Yet Jesus feels compelled to travel that way and comes in the heat of the day to Jacob's well near current Nablus.

A Samaritan woman comes to draw water, and we know that to do so at noon implies she wasn't on good terms or acceptable to the women of her town who would normally gather together early in the day to draw water for the day's needs, and catch up with each other.

A Jewish man and a Samaritan woman – the stage is set, and all cultural norms point to the fact that they shouldn't engage with each other at all, ethnic and gender barriers should forbid any association between them. But John's hearers' interest is probably also piqued by resonances from the Hebrew Scriptures about wells. Wells in the Bible were traditionally places of courtship and betrothals. Jacob's well is where their common ancestor Jacob had met his future wife Rachel. So just what is going to happen? Jesus takes the initiative and asks for a drink. But our Samaritan woman is not just one to kowtow and acquiesce to this stranger who seems to be ignoring all cultural norms. She promptly tells him this straight up, and the gospel writer backs her up – this is all wrong!

But Jesus goes deeper: if you knew who I was, you would be asking me for living water.

Her riposte comes back at him – um, have you noticed that you haven't got a bucket? And are you greater than our ancestor Jacob who gave us this well? Just who do you think you are?

Jesus drops down deeper another level: those who drink of the water I give them will never be thirsty. It will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.

The woman, like Nicodemus, is still operating on a literal level – it could be very handy to have access to a spring, not a well, she thinks.

Once again, Jesus goes deeper, moving onto the level of inner thirst: Go, call your husband, and come back.

Ah, she's quick with that response and technically right – I have no husband. But Jesus is onto it – you have had 5 husbands and the one you have now is not your husband. Now, we can jump to many conclusions about why she's had 5 husbands, many have called her a sinner or prostitute. None of that is in the text, nor the possibility that they may have died or abandoned her, leaving her vulnerable and shunned. As so often in John, there is also a symbolic level rippling underneath the surface. The woman can be seen to be standing for the Samaritan people as a whole, who it's said worshipped 5 foreign gods and so were only partially faithful to the covenant of God with Israel. John has already had John the Baptist hail Jesus as the bridegroom (John 3:21).

Is it that here Jesus is seeking to woo back the Samaritans into the fullness of covenant relationship with the God who offers life in its fullness?

The woman backs off though, this is all a bit close to home. She feels safer engaging in a bit of theological argument with this prophet who knows so much. Ok then, which is the correct sacred space for our worship?

But Jesus again takes things deeper: true worshippers will worship in spirit and truth, transcending contested places or races.

This feisty woman finally sees she's outclassed: the Messiah is coming, he'll sort it all out for us. Then Jesus takes the plunge, deeper into the first open revelation of his identity: *I am* he, the one speaking to you.

What a gift – and to a woman, and a foreigner! Jesus has gone deep in self-revelation – how will she respond? Well, she's let off the hook as the disciples blunder back into the scene, and she takes the chance to slip away. But note she leaves her water jar, so has she made the shift from well water to living water? And she goes back to her people in one of John's key roles, that of witness to what Jesus has said and done – Come and see...just as Jesus called his disciples. And the result – many Samaritans indeed come and see, and believe in Jesus because of the woman's testimony. And not just a footnote, Jesus and his disciples stay with the Samaritans for 2 days. Imagine what headlines that would have made, here is the community of Jews and Samaritans once again united around the figure of the one they now call the 'Saviour of *the world*' – remember last week's 'For God so loved *the world*...' (John 3:16).

The Samaritan woman now moves out of the picture – and yet the early church did not forget her. In the Orthodox church she has been given the name Photina, the one who came to the light; in Russian, her name becomes Svetlana. Just as Mary Magdalene was known as the apostle to the apostles so Photina is called the apostle to the Samaritans, and there is a church of St Photina in Nablus to this day.

In this Lenten season, we are reminded of Jesus' time in the wilderness, of the people of Israel's years in the wilderness when they struggled to trust God to satisfy their thirst. As we come to God today with all our thirsts, named and unnamed, overt and deep within us, may we come to Jesus who offers us afresh today living water, the waters of the Spirit to refresh and cleanse, to be water to our thirsty soul, to satisfy all our thirsts.

In situations we may be facing that feel like wilderness, or stuckness, or death, may we pray that the living water of Jesus will flow into and around them, and into and through us to flow out into a thirsty world. Amen.