

St Edmundsbury Cathedral



The Third Sunday of

Lent - She left her jar behind, John 4.5–42

Sunday 12 March 2023

St Edmundsbury Cathedral

Sermon by the Reverend Alison Miller – *Team Vicar for Lark Valley and North Bury Team Benefice and Diocesan Advisor for Women's Ministry*

She left her jar behind, Jn 4.5-42, Third Sunday of Lent

'Made in the Image of God - Fearfully and Wonderfully Made'

Lent sermon series, St Edmundsbury Cathedral

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Just a few days ago it was International Women's Day and the theme for this year was 'Embrace Equity' – and with it considerations of equality for women, awareness of discrimination, and celebrating women's achievements. It is an interesting theme to ponder from the perspective of being a woman and a priest in a Church which, in the wake of all orders of ministry now being open to all, has the Five Guiding Principles in operation. And many have argued and still argue about whether such Principles are a genuine chance for mutual flourishing or simply inequality enshrined in law. Phrases such as 'disagreeing well' and 'gracious restraint' are batted about: are they helpful means to get on and get along amidst theological complexities, or do they mask a 'theology of taint', a veiled misogyny? It is messy. Today, after all, is the anniversary of the ordination of the first women priests in 1994 in Bristol Cathedral.

Women, made in the image of God and chosen and called by God, have broken stained-glass ceilings but there is still potential to be lacerated by colourful shards in the fall-out. Perhaps we are still in the wilderness, and seasonally we most certainly are given it is Lent, so let us remain thankful for our female pioneers in the faith, those who have negotiated their own dusty pathways when being the very person God has made them to be and doing the very thing God has called them to do. In fact, let's reacquaint ourselves with one of these pioneers but be warned: she is no shrinking violet. We turn to the Gospel.

Use your imagination. Jesus, travelling with his disciples, is en-route from Judea to Galilee via a short cut through the non-Jewish territory of Samaria. The noonday sun beats down and exhausts those out and about at such a time.

The disciples are hungry and they head off into the city to find food. Jesus is left alone; weary and thirsty, he sits next to a well, Jacob's well in fact.

And perhaps this calls to mind other happenings from the Hebrew scriptures. Abraham's servant found Isaac a wife, Rebekah, at a well. Jacob met Rachel, Moses met Zipporah. Wells are a place of meeting, of encounter. Yet it is the middle of the day; no-one is about because it is so stupidly hot. The sensible thing is to get your water in the early morning when it is cool. But Jesus's weary solitude is about to be broken ... for out into the dust and heat comes a Samaritan woman carrying a jar ready to draw water from the well.

And when Jesus speaks to her, well, a genuinely daring and transgressive encounter unfolds given the hostilities between Jews and Samaritans and not least that a Samaritan woman was considered unclean, and given she is an unaccompanied female and he is a man, and given there they are alone together at

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a well and they are talking, interacting. What follows is one of the longest recorded conversations between Jesus and someone else in the Gospels; how frustrating then that we don't even know her name!

'Give me a drink,' says Jesus.

She doesn't comply with the request. Instead, she plonks down her water jar and so it begins.

Feisty from the off, she replies: 'How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?' It is a good question. So it is they engage in theological banter, speaking to one another as equals, like a game of table tennis, ping-pong statements, questions, backwards, forwards.

You know, after his mention of the 'gift of God' and that she should be asking him for living water, she points out he has no bucket. And anyway, who does he think he is? Greater than their ancestor Jacob? And where does he get this 'living water'?

Admittedly our Samaritan Woman does not quite get the full meaning of what Jesus says to begin with: the talk of the water that means she will never thirst, the water that will gush up to eternal life, she thinks it will just save her a trip to the well in the heat. Still, Jesus's offer of any kind of water is quite a role-reversal, for normally women would fetch water for men. Speaking of water, Jesus still thirsts. A cool drink is yet to come his way! But the Samaritan Woman isn't budging in that respect; plus, she is curious.

For all that is happening, we know precious little about this woman; even what Jesus reveals he knows about her doesn't help us much, though it hasn't prevented the usual disparaging discourse. Okay it is a fair point that perhaps she is marginalised, on the edge, doesn't wish to draw attention to herself hence coming out in the middle of the day when no one is about. But the reason for this is far from obvious. Jesus says, 'You have had five husbands and the one you have now is not your husband.' Cue lurid speculation. Is she a noiresque Femme Fatale who offs her husbands? Or maybe she is a widow passed along a line of brothers each time a husband has died, or abandoned or divorced or whatever. Some commentators seem ready to cite immorality, call her a whore, and create a whole sinful backdrop for her. And then we find ourselves in the unhelpful territory where biblical women are presented to us as super-good or super-bad, to emulate or avoid. Woman at a well, on her own? Oh, she is that kind of woman, she is asking for trouble. And don't we see that still played out today: therein lies the route to shaming and blaming. Let the living water help us to ditch the same old tired tropes and challenge them. And rehabilitate our biblical females while we're at it.

Anyway, this isn't one of those stories where we hear: 'go, your sins are forgiven you'. Jesus does not condemn her and neither should we. Yes she may well be marginalised but remember that does not mean she has done anything wrong. She is wonderfully and fearfully made. And Jesus knows her, gazes on her, has compassion for her.

And with the revelation that Jesus knows all about her past, it dawns on our Samaritan Woman that she is engaged in something much deeper. She recognises Jesus as a prophet. And as they talk some

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more about true worship, that God is spirit, and so on, here comes the clincher. The woman says, 'I know the Messiah is coming'. And Jesus says: 'I am he.' It is a wow moment and it is as if she has received a sudden infusion of that living water promised her, the Spirit itself poured out: her own thirst is quenched, her desire for God is met, and she is galvanised into action.

The disciples return, thinking plenty but saying nothing, though we're told they are astonished at the scene in front of them. If they haven't twigged it just yet, they will learn in time that Jesus turns convention on its head. Our woman sails on by, leaving them gawping: and she also leaves the empty water jar behind. That's for the past. She is off, into the city, for the Living Water is all about the now, the present; our fresh evangelist has the words 'Come and see' on her lips. She invites people to meet Jesus and through her witness she invokes the curiosity of the other Samaritans so much so they go to see him and Jesus remains in that place another few days. Sure, she still wonders and ponders about Christ but that is all part and parcel of exploring and deepening faith. Ultimately, whether the Samaritans believe because of her testimony or because they get to hear it straight from Jesus doesn't matter – in the end they too have had a life changing encounter and they too have worked out that Jesus is the Saviour of the world. This is universal good news!

Jesus never did get a drink from the Samaritan Woman as far as we're told. And there will be another noonday where Jesus thirsts, when he is hoisted upon a cross and will indeed complete what is needed in order to give all of us absolutely everything but that's for another time.

But here there was something about Jesus's initial thirst that awakened her own thirst: to ask questions, to desire to know God, to act in and through faith, to be a witness, an evangelist. The Living Water took her from a place of comfort, that is her known existence, into a place of uncertainty and potential. The Living Water is so far removed from the stasis of a stagnating pond, dull with no chance of growth. The Living Water is life-giving and dynamic...who knows what effect it will have in our world and who Jesus will call upon to ensure it happens?

The truth is we cannot keep God in a small, neat box, contained and working within parameters we feel most comfortable with or deem the most respectable. The Living Water is dangerous; it flushes us out of our comfort zones. Unsurprisingly, some folk may well be perturbed when the Holy Spirit starts effecting change....especially change which touches on power structures and hierarchy and inclusivity be that in Church or in wider society. Some will do what they can to hold out and build dams, to staunch the flow. But it will only hold for so long. The Holy Spirit is powerful. At some point a tsunami of Spirit will explode through the barriers. A groundswell of minorities and the forgotten and the dismissed and discriminated against will make their voices heard about all manner of subjects as a result of being enabled by that life giving water – the Spirit will gush out, just like it did in Samaria, and make some noise. It will challenge prejudice and oppression, and instead offer freedom and

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opportunity, justice and equality. And no doubt that life-giving-water has swirled in the backdrop of major human rights achievements in the last several hundred years.

The Samaritan Woman helps us to see the beginnings of all this. She tasted the water and acted on the call placed upon her. Jesus freely offers this living water. He offers it because he loves us most and knows us best. And as Jesus's interaction with the Samaritan Woman reveals: his living water is for everyone regardless of gender, ethnicity, status...sexuality, wealth, age...whatever. It is for everyone. Offered without prejudice. Jesus offers it because we are full of potential even if we don't see it ourselves. God places 'Come and see' on the lips of us all. Something to remember as we continue our Lenten journey.

Yes, we are all wilderness walkers at the moment, and perhaps we need to make time to stagger to a well for an encounter with Jesus, to reawaken our thirst, our desire for Jesus. And when we meet him, let us discover what Jesus desires for us as we drink deep of what he offers: the Living Water – reacquainting ourselves with the taste of the holy through Word, Sacrament, and the world around us. There we will find a new way of being, of living, is opened to us. Living out of love which has the ability to change our communities, our environment, our world. Embrace it – even if it seems challenging, and let us see what God is showing us and hear how God is calling us. We may just find that like the Samaritan Woman we leave our water jars behind....Jesus needs our hands free to do something else.

Amen.