

# St Edmundsbury Cathedral



The Third Sunday of Lent (also International Women's Day)

8 March 2026

St Edmundsbury Cathedral

Sermon by the Revd Canon Katy Cunliffe

Acknowledgement:

Bruce, Kate and Shercliff, Liz; *Out of the Shadows – Preaching the Women of the Bible Volume 2*; SCM Press, 2024 pp.260-266

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Today's Gospel reading is commonly heard and told and preached as the story of a nameless woman meeting Jesus at a well at midday. She is there at the hottest part of the day, we are told, because she has a shady past and wants to avoid her neighbours. Her shady past involves liaisons with a number of men, and Jesus reminds her that the one she is currently with is not her husband. The theologian, John Piper, preaching on this passage described the women as 'a worldly, sensually-minded, unspiritual harlot.' And he is not alone. Generations of preachers have preached about how Jesus calls out this sinful woman on how many "husbands" she's had, how many men she's been with. And it's perhaps not entirely their fault; for the very fact that the church has placed this story during the season of Lent, suggests that it has something to say to us about sin and repentance and moral purity.

And yet ... that interpretation makes a number of assumptions about the woman and her circumstances. It assumes she always went to the well at midday. The scripture does not tell us that at all. Perhaps on this particular day, something had happened and things had gone wrong in her morning and so she was delayed in arriving at the well.

It also assumes she was free to divorce and remarry. Whereas, in actual fact, women in first-century Palestine could not initiate divorce, unlike men, who could do so for trivial reasons. So if she had been divorced numerous times, it was not at her instigation and does not necessarily suggest she was deserving of it.

But divorce is not the most likely situation. The word Jesus uses that has been translated as 'husband' really just means 'man.' According to Roman laws of the time, only those who were born free could marry. Yet society of the time also virtually precluded single women. Daughters were property of their fathers and wives the property of their husbands. And when a husband died, the woman was passed to his next of kin. Rather than being an unfaithful, promiscuous woman, this woman may have been barren, and so unwanted, her ownership being passed from one man to another, to another, to another.

The common reading of this story does not do it justice. Because, despite us hearing it in Lent, this is not a story about sin and repentance. It is not a story about a woman with a shady past. It is not a story about a worldly, sensually-minded, unspiritual harlot.

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This is a story about a woman who meets Jesus, who comes to the realisation that he might be the Messiah that she knows is coming, and who immediately takes her new and tentative and shallow and no-where near fully-formed faith, and she goes and tells people about it. She goes back to the city and tells people about this man she's just met. About the conversation they had. Scripture tells us that many Samaritans from that city believed in Jesus because of her testimony. And when they then went to see Jesus for themselves, many more also came to believe.

This story is not about a woman's morality, or lack thereof. It is a story about an early woman evangelist. It is a story about a woman who met Jesus and, in telling other people about it, brought many more to faith in him. It is a story that should encourage us to do the same: to tell people our own stories of our encounters with Jesus.

Sometimes, like the Israelites in our Old Testament reading, our stories may be full of questions and anger at what is happening to us or in the world around us. Sometimes our stories might be full of doubts and uncertainties. Sometimes our stories might be full of hanging on in there when all around us is darkness.

But I hope that our stories might sometimes include something about welcome and acceptance and knowing that whoever we are and whatever we do, God loves us and is with us. I hope that our stories might sometimes include something about how when we come to worship, when we receive Jesus in the bread and the wine, when we receive God's blessing, something happens inside us and though we can't articulate what and why and how, we're glad about that.

However strong or weak or confused or partial or new or unclear or uncertain our faith is, it is enough. Because when we share our faith, we don't have to have all the answers. We don't have to be able to answer all the difficult questions. We just need to tell the stories of our own encounters with Jesus.

That's what this woman shows us and teaches us. That's how she inspires us in our Christian journey. This woman, too often remembered for her immorality, should be remembered as one of the first apostles and evangelists. An example and inspiration to us all.

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Of course, this woman is not alone in being mis-remembered and mis-represented in our patriarchal church tradition. We might also think of Mary Magdalene, friend and follower of Jesus, another apostle and evangelist. The first witness to the resurrection, confidently proclaiming 'I have seen the Lord.' Yet she is often known and remembered as a prostitute, a promiscuous woman. None of that comes from scripture. It comes from our patriarchal church tradition.

Or there's Eve. Remembered in our patriarchal church tradition as the one through whom sin and death entered the world, meaning that all her descendant sisters – that's all of us who are women – bear her stain. Yet what the Bible actually says is that Eve was the mother of the human race, pleasing partner to the first man, created in God's image.

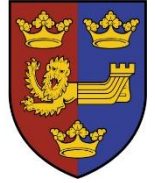
We should, I suppose, at least be grateful that we hear and remember these women at all. For there are many more women in scripture whose voices and whose stories we rarely get to hear at all. Women whose voices and whose stories are missing from our lectionary and from our liturgical calendar; missing from our memory and from our faith.

I have heard it said numerous times, since women have been able to be Bishops, that we now have gender equality in the Church of England. Even more so now that we have an Archbishop of Canterbury who is a woman.

Yes, we've come a long way and there is much to celebrate. But no, we don't have gender equality. So much of our church tradition – our interpretation of scripture, our lectionary and calendar, our liturgies, our hymnody, the language we use to speak about God – so much of it is patriarchal. The structures of our church do not treat women and men equally. And then there's the general misogyny and sexism that permeates every area of society, including the church.

It's easy for us to be complacent and think that doesn't happen here – we are an inclusive Cathedral, we like to think we're welcoming and friendly to everyone. And yes, in many ways, we are all of those things. But I will also say that I have experienced more misogyny since being in post here than I have in any other part of my ministry.

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In our Lent series this year, we are considering the future. How we might frame the future. What the future church might look like. So on this the Third Sunday of Lent, which happens to also be International Women's Day, I hope and pray and long for a future church in which women are treated equally. I hope and pray and long for a future church free from misogyny and patriarchy. I hope and pray and long for a future church in which the woman at the well – the woman that the Eastern Orthodox tradition has named Photini, meaning 'the Luminous One, – is remembered first and foremost as an apostle and evangelist. A brave, wise, insightful woman who met Jesus by chance at midday by a well, who sees him for who he is, and who goes and tells other people about her encounter with him.

May she – may Photini – inspire and encourage each one of us to do the same. Amen.