

## Boy meets girl at well: Two readings

*Fellowship@10, 8 March 2026*

*Alison Sampson, reflecting on John 4:1-42*

No doubt you've heard a sermon on this broad before. Short skirt, red lipstick, and way too many boyfriends: how gracious of Jesus to speak with her! What a mensch! And what a miracle that the townsfolk turned to him despite her vague and wishy-washy testimony. Isn't God amazing?!

At least, I've read those commentaries and I've heard those sermons. And if this is all that is going on, then my sermon is done and we can all go home. But isn't this interpretation more than a little sexist, clichéd and boring? And isn't it possible that something a lot more interesting is going on?

I believe so, in fact I reckon there are lots of interesting things in this story. But to address even one or two of those things, we'll need to go back to some earlier stories, namely how Isaac and Rebecca, Jacob and Rachel, and Moses and Zipporah met. 'What happened?' their kids might have asked. Each could be summarised like this: boy meets girl at a well. That is, in each case, either the boy or his representative turns up at a watering hole in a foreign land. There he encounters a girl. One of them draws water; the girl runs home and tells everyone about the stranger; the boy accepts hospitality; the marriage is arranged; and everyone lives happily (or grumpily) ever after. We have pubs and dating apps; they had wells; it's a thing.

So when we hear of a boy and a girl at a well, we should think instantly of marriage and of famous marriages in Israel's history. We should recall that marriage is the primary metaphor used to describe Israel's covenant relationship with God, and infidelity the disruption of that covenant. We should remember with a smile the wedding at Cana, which happened just a page or two earlier. And we should be listening to John the Baptist who in chapter 3 has just said that he is not the Messiah; instead, 'He who has the bride is the bridegroom.' (3:29).

In other words, today's story sets us up for a meet-cute: but then there's the record-scratch. Because just when the scripturally alert begin to wonder if Jesus is about to hook up, it turns out that this is no virgin daughter of Israel. Instead she's a Samaritan. Samaritans and Jews were neighbours. They had common ancestors, including the beforementioned couples Isaac

and Rebecca, Jacob and Rachel, and Moses and Zipporah. They shared faith stories, but how they interpreted them had diverged so greatly that Jews came to consider Samaritans as unclean, heretical, foreign. To keep the peace, the two groups had little to do with each other, to the point that they would often walk around each other's territory rather than risk encountering the other.

But here is Jesus travelling through Samaria, and asking for a drink of water. That he is requesting this from a Samaritan woman is highlighted three times at the start. 'A Samaritan woman came to draw water ... The Samaritan woman said to him, 'How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?' Just in case we miss all this, the writer reminds us that 'Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.' (v 9). No wonder the disciples were shocked.

More, she's been married five times. So is she the short-skirted red lip-sticked hussy of many a preacher's fantasy? Probably not. I suggest that commentators who obsess over her sexual history are revealing more about themselves than anything else. In her context, marriage was organised for women by others. Death at any age was common, and divorce was something only a man could initiate. This woman is not so much a hussy as unlucky, married off to men who have all dropped dead or divorced her, or trapped in a levirate marriage where the sixth brother refuses to marry her.

Commentators could learn a lot from Jesus, who is matter-of-fact about her personal history. 'You've had five husbands,' he says, 'and the one you have now isn't your husband.' End of story. No further comment, no condemnation in Christ. He simply observes.

His observation is made in the middle of an extended theological discussion about water, worship and the Messiah. In John's account, 'wordy is the Lamb' while everyone else for the most part stays silent. But this Samaritan woman – this Samaritan! this woman! – engages in an extended conversation, setting out their divergent beliefs and asking questions.

Last week, we heard about Nicodemus, the Jewish religious leader who came to Jesus under cover of darkness, did not comprehend in their initial conversation, and skulked away until chapter 7. By way of contrast, the unnamed Samaritan woman encounters the light in the bright noonday sun and immediately begins to get it. She's so excited she rushes off to tell everyone about Jesus and, like the disciples leaving their nets, she leaves her

water jar behind. Perhaps she trusts Jesus' promise of water so greatly that she knows she won't need it again.

So we have the boy, the girl, the watering hole in a foreign land, and the girl running off to tell everyone. On the basis of her clearly trustworthy testimony, many of the townsfolk believe, and they invite Jesus to stay with them. Sticking to the script, and thus rejecting a world where Jews don't share things with Samaritans, Jesus accepts their hospitality. 'And many more believed because of his word,' the story tells us. Indeed, they said, 'We know that this is truly the Saviour of the world.' (4:41-42).

In other words, the messianic bridegroom has arrived and been embraced; the marriage is complete. But what marriage is this?

There's an intriguing possibility evoked by 2 Kings 17. The region has been invaded by Assyria, which forcibly removed many local Indigenous people and scattered them across the empire, while forcibly resettling other colonised peoples on the newly acquired land. It's a bit like what happened in this place, when Indigenous people of different language groups were compelled to live together on missions far from home, while the scum of the British Empire were sentenced to be resettled here for the term of their natural life.

2 Kings reads, 'The king of Assyria brought people from Babylon, Cuthah, Avva, Hamath, and Sepharvaim [five nations], and placed them in the cities of Samaria in place of the people of Israel; they took possession of Samaria, and settled in its cities. When they first settled there, they did not worship Yahweh ...' (2 Kings 17:24ff). This led to disaster. The foreign gods did not teach the law of the land and the land reacted violently. So Assyria found an Israelite priest and shipped him back home to reintroduce the worship of Yahweh.

However, the resettled foreign nationals continued to worship their own gods right alongside Yahweh. Three times the story tells us, and I quote, 'To this day they continue to practice their former customs,' which included sacrifice to violent gods, including the sacrifice of children.

The story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman can be understood, then, as a story of reconciliation between Jews and Samaritans. If marriage is a metaphor for divine covenant, where God is the bridegroom and a nation is the bride, here the God in Jesus reaches out to the woman who has had five husbands, that is, the nation which has been forcibly intermingled with five

foreign nations and five sets of violent gods. Through Jesus, God offers a nonviolent, noncoercive relationship with Samaria, promising a fresh start, living water, fullness of life, true worship.

So this could be a story for neighbours that have become estranged through diverging traditions, colonisation and generations of violence. Israel and Palestine, Israel and Lebanon, and Israel and Iran spring to mind, so too Russia and Ukraine, Thailand and Cambodia, Anglo and Wurundjeri people, and so on and so forth. It suggests that animosity is not the end of the story. Instead, engaging in conversation, offering and receiving refreshment, offering and receiving life, showing that we truly know one another, and finding a way to worship together in spirit and in truth, can lead to healing and loving relationship.

Such a reading is certainly intriguing, and for some it will be life-giving. But there's a risk. If we interpret it this way but align ourselves with a triumphal image of Jesus, we'll be tempted to go barging into other people's territory convicted of our faith and of the necessity of others adopting it. Then we will be no different to Assyria introducing foreign gods to Samaria or, indeed, those missionaries who came to this place and enacted violence in the name of Christ (and sadly there were plenty).

I'm not sure any of us were forcibly removed from our families, detained on a mission and compelled to call ourselves Christian. Even so, at one time or another many of us will have had a fairly awful experience of evangelism. Many of us will have encountered manipulative, judgemental, triumphalist, self-righteous and self-assured Christians who have tried to shove their version of God down our throats; in the extreme, they might be Christian nationalists. Rather than converting us, such witnesses usually turn us away from faith, or make us afraid of sharing our own. But if our faith is good news – and if it isn't, then why are we here? – then we should share it, for sharing faith is a hallmark of discipleship.

This brings me back to the Samaritan woman. As Christians, our first impulse is to model ourselves on Jesus' disciples, especially when it comes to mission. But the disciples resent that Jesus is talking with the Samaritan woman, though rather than have it out with him they grumble among themselves. They call him 'Teacher'; she recognises him as 'Messiah.' They have a proprietary attitude towards mission; she is spontaneous, generous.

And they go to town looking for a sandwich, while she rushes in to bear witness.

Her witness is fascinating: it's to a faith which is tentative, full of questions: 'He can't be the Messiah, can he?' she asks. Yet something about her conversation has moved her so powerfully that she wants her neighbours to encounter Jesus. 'Come and see!' she says. With these words, she echoes Philip, who back in chapter 1 invites Nathanael to come and see if any good can come out of Nazareth (v 46). She also echoes Jesus himself, who invites John's disciples to come and see where he is abiding. But despite or maybe because of this tentative, question-filled faith, her testimony is powerful and effective; indeed, she is the most effective evangelist in John's story.

For those of us who feel unsure of our faith, of our capacity for testimony, or of the ethics of evangelism, I suggest the Samaritan woman shows us the way. She's invitational: 'Come and see!' She's honest that she's not yet entirely sure: 'He can't be the Messiah, can he?' She tells everyone in the city that Jesus sees and knows her, while allowing them to come to their own conclusions and their own relationship with Jesus.

And in the great marriage of Jesus and the woman, Yahweh and Samaria, heaven and earth, they do. For in time the townsfolk come to confess, 'It is no longer because of your word that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves. We know that this is truly the Saviour of the world.'

With the Samaritan woman, then, and with the unclean, the heretic, and the foreigner, with our neighbour, with our enemy, and with all we consider beyond the religious pale, come, let us worship God in spirit and in truth. Ω