

SERMON, ST LEONARD'S DENMARK

8TH MARCH, 2026

Lent Three

Ex. 17:1-7

Ps. 95

Rom.5:1-11

Jn.4:5-42

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be always acceptable in your sight O Lord, our strength and our Redeemer...

The story of Jesus and the woman at the well is one of those that sticks in the mind. I heard it for the first time before I read the story, and I heard it with a focus on what Jesus says about "living water". To be sure, there is a whole sermon here on Jesus as the quencher of our inner thirst for divine since most of us yearn for just that.

But as I reflected on this text, I came to wonder, more and more, about just how and why Jesus was having this conversation at all. Jesus is returning from Judaea to Galilee. He and his disciples have gone down from Jerusalem to the Jordan Valley, where the disciples are baptising people. From there, they decide to return to Galilee. The road to Galilee leads up along the Jordan, rising very gently as it goes until it turns north-east to the city of Scythopolis, which is such a major crossroads that all of the inland Roman roads in Judaea pass through it. The Jordan Valley itself is one of the deepest points on the surface of the planet, and averages, along its length, a depth of about 300m below sea level. The walk along the road to Scythopolis was relatively direct and relatively flat. But that is not the way that they went. Instead, they took the longer and more taxing road since it climbed 850 metres in its 66km course.

By the time that Jesus broke his journey in Sychar – near or at ancient “Shechem” – he and his disciples had been on the road for a day and a half of climbing up the long hill. So, if there is an easier way to get to the Galilee, you have to wonder why they took this path. I’m sure his disciples were grumbling. They weren’t riding horses. They were too poor for that. They may have had a mule or a donkey to carry their meagre baggage, but they themselves were walking. And they must have felt every step. Moreover, they were going to Samaria. They were going towards a people rejected by first century Jews. That hostility can be seen in the implications of the Parable of the Good Samaritan – the most unlikely person acts as the neighbour to the injured man, the one cast aside, *herem* was the word that they used. So Jesus was heading into the heart of the country of a people rejected by the Jews of Judaea as wicked and foolish.

So you have to ask yourself why they went that way. John just says that “they had to go through Samaria”. The implication of the language that John uses is not that they couldn’t go the other way so much as they had to go through Samaria as a matter of necessity. Jesus was compelled by some inner force to go that way. There is a sense that this was an encounter that was always going to happen.

And what of this encounter? In the heat of the day, Jesus sat down in the shade, by the well, hot, tired, dusty and alone. The disciples had gone into town to get some supplies, leaving Jesus to his own devices. That was when the woman came to draw water. Now here are two remarkable things. The first is that it was noon. Why would anybody in their right mind go to the well to do the serious work of fetching water in the heat of the day? Water was carried in big pottery jars. It was heavy to carry and then, as now, was borne on the head or the shoulder. Normally, in the life of an ancient village, we would expect the water to be brought first thing, soon after dawn in the cool of the morning. But ancient villages were tiny places, and the marital history of the woman was well known, so none of the townswomen would associate with her. She was compelled to come in the heat of the day, because she was seen as, as the old language puts it, a “fallen

woman”. The other thing is that Jesus spoke to her at all. She was a woman, alone. He was a man, alone. Men simply did not talk like this with unaccompanied women. It put them both under suspicion. Moreover, she was a Samaritan; he, a Jew. She remarks on this herself, with a sense of disbelief. Thus we have a person thrice alienated from mainstream society: she is a Samaritan; she is a woman; and she has a reputation for sexual laxity.

The great Swiss systematic theologian Karl Barth once commented about preaching: “Take your Bible and take your newspaper, and read both. But interpret newspapers from your Bible.” Today is International Women’s Day (so it’s sort of ironic that I am preaching and not one of the many women who more regularly occupy this pulpit). Its theme this year is “Give to Gain”, and its overall purpose remains the objective of gender equality that has governed the organisation of International Women’s Day since 1911. Gifts are not compelled. To give is an act of grace. And it was in an act of grace that Jesus walked 62 km from the depths of a river valley to the heights of the hill country of Samaria and at Shechem sat down at the well with a woman who was thrice despised. Jesus did not despise her. He gave her dignity. Knowing her as he did, even then, he offered her the living water of himself, of the divine Spirit, ever within her, welling up to refresh her and offer her the words that we all long to hear: “You are loved”.

Commentators have called her “the first apostle” because of what happened next. She told everyone whom she met in the city to come and see. She spread the news of this extraordinary visitor, and so the people came to see. The disciples had said nothing – they had just bought food – perhaps because they were unwilling to share Jesus with these Samaritan infidels. So the woman did their work for them, sharing the gospel of the kingdom with people who otherwise would not have heard it. Jesus would otherwise have gone on to the next place. But instead, he stayed for two days. Because this thrice despised woman spread the word.

In the past couple of weeks, our newspapers have been carrying stories of thrice-despised women. Eleven of them. They are Muslim; they are women; and they are the widows of acknowledged terrorists. Between them, they have twenty-three children. The law says that they are Australian citizens with the right to return home. Most public discourse says that they are unbearable security risks; that they cast aside their country when they went to be with their husbands ten years ago and are therefore not fit to return to it; that it would be an affront to minorities, like the Yezidis, whose families had been massacred by ISIS. But what happens when we interpret our newspapers through our Bible? Especially through the story told in this morning's reading? We come to a point of major discomfort. And we do it on International Women's Day. Jesus walked a long and hard road to give dignity, respect and hope to a thrice despised woman. Our community has swept eleven of them under oriental carpets in the Syrian desert. And now, as the missile fly overhead, it is probably too late to bring them home.

This is a confronting truth. It is a hard truth. It is a truth that will not admit compromise. And I am not here to tell you what to do about it. I am not going to tell you what letters to write, what conversations to have, what phone calls to make. I am only here to tell you, on International Women's Day, what the Bible says about thrice-despised women. This is not about common-sense, or prudence, or caution. It is about to whom we give our lives and how we express that in our actions. For our faith is not a faith of judgement, but of grace; it is not a faith of fear, but of love; it is not a faith of anger, but of joy. Jesus went out of his way to give the woman at the well that grace, that love and that joy. What will we do?

The Lord be with you...