

Last Sunday we met Nicodemus, the first in our series on people who had a personal encounter with Jesus. Nicodemus, a stalwart in the community of religious leaders, planned to visit Jesus at night and not during the day. We don't know if Nicodemus was sent by his peers, or came on his own initiative, but the narrative lets us discover, he came with a sincere heart.

Even a sincere heart, is not immune from shock; Nicodemus was shocked to hear this untrained Rabbi (teacher), who appeared to know more about the Law and Jewish theology say, "*unless you are born again, you will not be able to see the kingdom of God.*" Suddenly, Nicodemus felt inadequate in his understanding, theology and practice of Judaism, particularly that of admitting a newcomer into the Jewish faith. Confronted with the words, "Unless **YOU** are born again...", he thinks, *but **I AM** a Jew! I am not a convert! Why should I go through this initiation to cast aside my past, to wipe out my former life?*

Ah!, but you must discard, never to return to your old destructive habits, your old way of thinking which is not in line with God's way of thinking, the way you treated people, which is not the way God wants you to treat people.

Nicodemus, unless you are born again... Nicodemus needed **this** new birth.

"Fake news" is not a Donald Trump construct; fake news existed shortly after creation when Satan said to Eve, "Did God really say...?". After Jesus' dialogue with Nicodemus, fake news reached the Pharisees, "Jesus is baptising **more** disciples than John", which was enough to put them on the boil. The truth was, Jesus let His disciples do the baptising. I believe he did this, lest anyone later claim their baptism by Jesus, was superior and of greater "value", perhaps even "purer", than the baptism by John (a locust-eating-and-wild-honey-sipping, hippie-like character), or the inexperienced, untrained novices that were the disciples.

On hearing this fake news, that He was baptising **more** disciples than John, Jesus did not want a confrontation with the Pharisee, nor was He avoiding them, so He sets off north to Nazareth from Judea via Samaria, avoiding the

main road beside the river Jordan, along which the Pharisees would have travelled.

I was struggling to find a collective noun to describe a group of Pharisees. If we can have a **host** of daffodils, a **committee** of vultures, a **pandemonium** of parrots and a **chattering** of starlings, surely we can have a **disturbance** of Pharisees!

John tells us, *Jesus **had** to pass through Samaria*¹.

What was the compulsion to do so?

Jesus told Nicodemus, “all things have been given into (My) hands”², so we can safely believe, Jesus **chose** to travel this, rather dangerous route, because His Father had made an appointment for Him, with a shady lady at a well in the heart of Samaria!

First thing to notice is that Jesus always acts with **PURPOSE**.

Jesus never acts without purpose. God has a purpose for us His creation, and Jesus is acting in sync with that purpose. If we think of God as acting at random, then He cannot be God. Everything in God’s creation is structured; nothing is random. God acts, therefore, with purpose, and His purpose is always accomplished.

Now, in order to better understand this historical narrative (not to be confused with the **parable** of the good Samaritan!), it is helpful to appreciate the reason for hostilities and acrimony between Samaritans and Jews. Very, very **briefly**:

Israel told God they wanted a King like all the countries had³; Samuel warned them that earthly kings instead of God as their King, would be a catastrophic, but they insisted and persisted until God anointed Saul⁴, Israel’s first King, who

¹ John 4:4

² John 3:35

³ 1 Samuel 8

⁴ c1023- 1004 BC

turned out to be a disaster because he rejected God. David, Israel's second king was not perfect by any means, but in his heart, all he desired was to please God. David's son Solomon, lived off papa's wealth. He fathered many children, but was not a father to them.

Until the reign of King Solomon, Israel was a united country. Around 1000 BC, Solomon's arrogant and proud son Rehoboam, took decisions which resulted in dividing the country into "north" and "south"⁵. 300 years later⁶, the Assyrians conquered the Northern Kingdom of Israel (where Samaria was located), deported most of the Jews, replacing them with foreigners, who intermarried with the Jews who remained. Their religion became a mixture of their foreign, pagan gods with Judaism⁷. When the exiles returned, the Samaritans offered to help them rebuild their temple in Jerusalem, but the Jews viewed them as foreign enemies and refused their offer⁸.

300 years later⁹, the Samaritans built a rival temple in Samaria, which the Jewish leader at the time¹⁰, burnt down. This did not improve relations and Jews continued to treat Samaritans as biological and religious half-breeds. In Jesus' day, this attitude had grown into intense hostility between them.

We can't properly understand and grasp the message of this story (John 4) unless we appreciate this history.

Exhausted from His journey north from Judea, Jesus rests by Jacob's well in Samaria, while the disciples go to buy food. At noon, a lady arrives at the well. Unusual! Most women draw water from wells in the cooler hours of the early morning or the late afternoon.

⁵ 1 Kings 12 and parallel text in 2 Chronicles 10

⁶ 722 BC

⁷ 2 Kings 17:24-41

⁸ Ezra 4:1-5

⁹ about 400 BC

¹⁰ John Hyrcanus in 128 BC

As would have been expected from a Jewish man, Jesus asks this lady for a drink of water, which was an astonishing break from accepted culture, knowing the state of affairs between the Jews and the Samaritans.

She replies, as we expect her to, *How is it that you, a Jew, ask me a woman of Samaria, for a drink of water?*

Tribalism, which is separating people on the basis of religious, social or ethnic groups, is nothing new. We don't seem to learn from history, that such distinctions fuel more problems in society. We are living in strange and peculiar times, when tribalism is fuelled by all segments of society: the press act like a judicial court in which radio and TV presenters and newspaper journalists are both judge and jury; courts act as librarians, keepers of vast libraries of subtleties of law, while local and national government officers hide behind the safety of these laws without consideration for human need; the church acts like politicians, taking sides in political debate without reference to true religion; and politicians try to act as religious leaders, promising all people, they would be their saviour.

We can expect the shady lady at the well, to have been treated by politicians, social do-gooders and the religious elite in this same way, which explains her response to the thirst of a stranger asking for a drink of water, *How can you a Jew, ask me a Samaritan woman...?*

She was doing what human nature seems to do best: *you are not one of us, so what makes you think I should help you?*, or as we listen to voices from London at this time, *you are not one of us, what makes you think we should trust you?*

In each encounter, Jesus responds to the personal need of the individual. Nicodemus needed to see how far off-track his religious practice had taken him, and he needed to be “born again” into a new way of life.

This shady lady by the well needs to understand, quenching human thirst, being compassionate to a person in need, is more than a drink from a bucket

of water; so Jesus replies, *If only you knew who was asking for a drink of water, you would have instead asked **HIM** for water and **HE** would have, with abounding joy, given you **living water!***

Nicodemus, the religious big-wig, and the shady lady at the well, have one thing in common. Both mock Jesus by taking His word, literally! Nicodemus said, *Do you really expect an adult like me to enter my mother's womb to be born again? You cannot be serious!*¹¹

This shady lady says, *You have nothing with which to draw water, how can you promise me **living water?** You cannot be serious!*

Here on, the narrative continues in several parts, which we will note but not explore today: Jesus uncovers the shady lady's past, and she thinks Him to be a prophet; the disciples return with food and are shocked to find Jesus talking to a Samaritan woman; she then leaves her water bucket and runs off to tell her people, *Come see the Man who told me all that I ever did! Could this be the Christ?*, which resulted in *many Samaritans from that town believed this Jesus was indeed the Messiah, because of the woman's testimony, **He told me all that I ever did!***

If you are looking for evidence of revival as a result of human testimony, look no further! It happened in Samaria, when a shady-lady by a well, encountered Jesus. No one would have ever expected this lady to become an evangelist.

There is, however, a point at which this lady's life changes. It is not her amazement that Jesus revealed her past to her, like a fortune teller with a crystal ball might, which changed and transformed her.

In response to her rather frivolous comment, *You don't seem to have a bucket, how can you offer me any water, living or otherwise?*, Jesus explains a simple truth: *Whoever drinks this water from Jacob's Well will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks of the water I give, will never, ever again be thirsty.*

¹¹ John McEnroe at Wimbledon, 1981

Jesus adds, *The person who drinks the water I offer, in that person, this water will become a spring, welling up to eternal life.*

In the enduring words of the opening scene in the original film, “The Godfather”, *Jesus made her an offer she could not refuse!*

But first, lets understand what Jesus offers the shady lady at the well.

The geology of the land of Israel/Palestine lent itself to large aquifers - rain water from the hills percolating into the soil, flowing downhill into the plains where **only** a deep well could access this pool of water.

Jesus is not offering this lady at the well, aquifer-fed water, which sits deep in the water table, waiting to be drawn up. Jesus offers her spring-fed water, which bubbles up to the top under pressure, providing an unending, overflowing supply of water.

If one could still visit the city of Tyre, we would see an open cistern of fresh, sweet water, a few hundred yards from the seashore, which legend has it, was built by King Solomon’s water diviner, in return for the cedar wood from Lebanon used to build the Temple at Jerusalem.

*This water I give, says Jesus, will become in that person a **spring** of water, welling up (bubbling up) to eternal life. This person will never, ever be thirsty as they would not have to **draw** water to quench their thirst! **This IS LIVING WATER!***

David the Shepherd praises God for *leading him beside still waters, ever flowing fresh streams of water which restores his soul*¹².

The shady lady understands the difference between huffing and puffing to draw-out buckets of water from a well, 100 foot deep, and a spring-fed well which gushes, overflowing with fresh running water.

Some say she was still sceptical and taunted Jesus, *Sir, give me this water so that I will not thirst again and will not have to come here again to draw water!* Perhaps

¹² Psalm 23

she was taking him literally again, challenging Jesus to produce this **living water**. I think otherwise. This was the moment of transformation for the lady at the well. *If you can transform my life so that I will not have to come here during the hottest hour of the day to draw water, and wipe out the shame which my society has placed on me, I want what you are offering!*

The conversation with this lady follows the same pattern as the conversation with Nicodemus, which when you come to think of it, is no different from how we treat God's Word. Jesus makes a statement, it is taken in the wrong sense. Jesus rephrases the statement more vividly. It is still misunderstood. Then Jesus compels the person he is addressing, to discover and face the truth for themselves. This is the way Jesus taught and people learned.

As back then, so too now, there are certain truths a person cannot **accept**, and must necessarily, discover for **themselves**.

Like Nicodemus, the Samaritan lady by the well, found it difficult to understand and **accept** Jesus teachings; she had to **discover** it for herself. Not only did Jesus reveal her past, He promised living water, which would bubble up in her as a spring, which would transform her life. This is what clinched it for her. *This man does not condemn me for my past. He releases me from my past, I am transformed and free, able to tell others about Him **and they believe me!***

The **living water** has cleansed and healed her from her past, and is now gushing out from within her like infectious confidence! Her community now trust her. As a result, the salvation of God came to that town because of one shady lady's testimony. The divine appointment for which Jesus "**had** to pass though Samaria", accomplished its divine purpose.

Nicodemus' encounter with Jesus transformed his life; this Samaritan lady's encounter with Jesus transformed her life.

An encounter with Jesus in the pages of God's Word will transfer your life too. Jesus does not want to judge you. He wants to show you God's love. He does

not care whether, like Nicodemus you are upper middle class, morally upright and religious, or whether like the shady lady at the well, you might consider yourself to be a “nobody” with a messed up past, without a *proper* education, misunderstood and misrepresented, or anything in between.

Jesus loves you because He wants to see you restored to the family of God. He wants an encounter with you, to sort out any misunderstanding you might have about Him, about His Father. You might take Him literally and say to yourself, *well it hurt pretty badly when I was hit on this side of my face, and Jesus wants me to show the other cheek?* You might take Him literally and say to yourself, *Jesus said, **Where two or three are gathered in My Name, I am there with them**, so why do I need to go and be involved in Church?* Don't take Jesus literally; ask and God will reveal Himself to you.

Jesus loved both Nicodemus and the lady at the well.

It is this love which seeks us out, desperately wanting a relationship with us, eager to restore us into the family of God. Nicodemus responded slowly and rationally; the lady at the well responded quickly and emotionally.

How will you respond?

AMEN.