


## A STREAM THAT BECOMES A TIDAL WAVE

Exodus 17. 1-7

Romans 5. 1-11

John 4. 5-42

I speak to you in the name of  the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.  
Amen.

I wonder, where do you like to go out for a drink in Guernsey?

Across the centuries, people have always gathered where beverages are available. Even today we sometimes call a restaurant, bar or pub our favourite ‘watering hole’ because it’s the place where we go to unwind with our friends over a glass of wine or something similar. Or for those of us who work, we may gather at the coffee machine not only for a drink, but also in order to catch up on the latest rumours.

Things were not very different in our Lord’s time. The village well was the watering hole where everyone gathered two times a day; and when they did so, people lingered a bit so that they could catch up on news and also hear the latest gossip. At Jacob’s well in the town of Sychar, the Samaritan woman who features in our story had no doubt herself been a source of unending gossip. Needless to say, when she used to show up at the well in person, conversation ceased; eyes were averted; and perhaps even a few unkind and disapproving looks were directed her way.

So eventually she had given up. She stayed at home when everyone else was out, and she went out only when everyone else was at home. In the past, when we have read this story, many of us have assumed that the Samaritan woman got what she deserved. After all, she was a sleazy, sinful woman. But she might have been a victim, too. Don’t forget that in Jesus’s day, women had no social standing. They

certainly could not be the initiators of divorce.<sup>1</sup> The women didn't have much say in the matter. And so perhaps this woman was the kind of person who, desperate for some attention and affection, hooked up with all the wrong men who in turn used her and then discarded her.

We don't know that this was so, but one thing becomes clear in the course of her conversation with Christ: she is not ignorant. This woman even knows some theology! This woman has thought about spiritual matters. She's aware of the promised Messiah, knows something of the controversy between the Jews and the Samaritans about where God may (or may not) be appropriately worshipped. For some time now, the town has written her off as a bad sort of person, but deep down inside her beat the heart of someone who was thirsty for God.

Yet before any of that becomes evident in this story, this woman first has to overcome her shock at having our Lord speak to her at all. As we just noted, her heart no doubt sank when she saw that on this particular day, her plan to avoid all contact failed. Someone was there. Worse, it was a man. Doubly worse, it looked like a Jewish man. You didn't see too many Jews in Samaria most days. Jews rather assiduously avoided that area, willingly adding a few extra days to their journey so they could take the long way around that stretch of land called Samaria.

Jesus had opted against that (as is clear in the first four verses of John 4) and therefore cut straight through the heart of Samaria. So when this woman saw him, she perhaps averted her eyes, grit her teeth and hoped to get through this as painlessly as possible. But then the man cleared his throat, and she probably thought, 'Here it comes!' But no, there is a kind timbre to his voice. He even asks her for some water, instead of barking out a demand to her. She should have kept her mouth shut, but she is so

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<sup>1</sup> Under certain circumstances, the woman could approach the court which would, if it thought fit, compel the husband to divorce her (cf. Mishnah, *Ket.* 7. 9, 10). Or she might pay him or render services to him to induce him to divorce her.

taken aback that she blurts out, ‘How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?’

Christ was indeed breaking with convention to engage this woman, which is why the disciples will shortly be so scandalised to witness this. After all, consider these pieces of conventional wisdom that were taught by rabbis in the synagogues of our Lord’s day: ‘A man shall not talk with a woman in the street, not even with his own wife, on account of what others may say. He that talks much with womankind brings evil upon himself.’

But Jesus not only speaks with this woman, he speaks the words of life to her. He uses the well as an occasion to introduce the memorable image of living water, a new spring of water that would well and bubble up into all eternity. Needless to say, this woman wants to buy shares in the company that produces this wonderful libation. ‘OK,’ Christ says, ‘but let’s bring your husband into the deal, too.’ Why did our Lord say that? To shame her, the way the other residents of Sychar would do by mentioning this? No. To embarrass her, to condemn her? No, but probably as a reminder that she had been trying to quench her thirst in all the wrong ways. It wasn’t sex or meeting Mr Right or finding companionship that was going to satisfy her thirst.

Finally the woman catches on to what Jesus is saying. Unlike Nicodemus in the previous chapter of John’s gospel, we know how she responded: she raced back to the village and began knocking on doors whose doorsteps she had not darkened in years. Somehow she forgot that she was supposed to avoid these people. Instead, she rather quickly became a member of the community once more. Before this story is finished, villagers are actually speaking to her again (and speaking gratefully at that). I also find it astonishing that this woman proclaimed the Good News by claiming she had met a man who ‘told me everything I have ever done!’ But wasn’t her ‘past’

exactly what had led to her isolation in the first place? What an example of grace we have here, where the ‘past’ that had made the woman so miserable now becomes the doorway through which she bring others to Christ.

If ever I were going to make a short film of this incident for a Sunday school class, I know what I would want my final image to be. It emerges from a tiny, yet telling detail in verse 28, when we are told this woman left her water-jar behind. That’s quite an image! Later in verses 39-42 as the Samaritans happily urge our Lord to stay in their village for a while, I picture the whole jubilant crowd hustling Jesus and the disciples back into town.

As the noise of their laughter fades, and as the dust from their feet settles in the noonday heat, I would have a camera slowly zoom in on that abandoned water-jar next to Jacob’s well. The Samaritan woman had come to the well earlier that day thirstier than she knew. She left sensing that she’d never be truly thirsty again. To encounter Christ is to find *life*: a stream of living water that wells up in us now; a stream of water that will mount up over time until it becomes finally a mighty tidal wave of cleansing that will wash over the entire world, making us and all things new.

*This* is the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. Thanks be to God.

Amen.