

## **Sermon for 8<sup>th</sup> March 2026, Year A, Lent 3**

**Preached at St Serf's Shettleston**

**John 4.5–42**

### **Sermon**

Our gospel reading this week is almost the exact mirror image of last week, and this cannot be a coincidence, especially since the two passages follow one another very closely in John's gospel.

Last week we heard the story of Nicodemus, a wise, respected and educated Pharisee, a man at the heart of the Jewish establishment, coming nervously to ask Jesus questions by night. He tries to take Jesus' responses literally and fails to understand who Jesus is and what he is about.

This week, the woman whom Jesus meets at the well could not be more different from Nicodemus. She is an uneducated woman, not a teacher; she is a Samaritan, not a Jew; she has a shameful past and is not a respected member of the establishment. Unlike Nicodemus, the woman at the well is not even worthy of being named in the text. But she also happens to meet Jesus, not at night, but at noon in full daylight, and it is Jesus who needs her help.

Everything about this woman makes her an outsider and separates her from Jesus, and from her own community. Unlike the super-important Nicodemus, she is hardly worthy of anyone's attention, and she knows her place, immediately asking Jesus why a Jewish man is asking a Samaritan woman for water.

But now we see that what Jesus says to her is also in sharp contrast to his conversation with Nicodemus. Jesus had made fun of the Pharisee, but the Samaritan woman he takes seriously. He is hard on Nicodemus and impatiently

mocks his lack of understanding, but with the woman he is compassionate and nurturing, happy to explain his metaphors and fully answer all her questions.

Immediately, this is good news for anyone who knows the humiliation of being stigmatised or side-lined, ignored or oppressed by those with power and status.

Jesus has a far longer conversation with the Samaritan woman than he does with Nicodemus, and the outcome is far more positive. Nicodemus struggles at first to believe that Jesus has even been sent by God, but the Samaritan woman's open-hearted declaration that Jesus must be a prophet means that she is the very first person in the gospel of John to hear Jesus declare plainly, "I am the Messiah you're looking for". In fact, he is even more blunt. What he actually says is "I am the I AM you're looking for" – 'I AM' being the name of God – 'Yahweh' in Hebrew.

Everything about that previous conversation with Nicodemus had been full of secrecy. Nicodemus couldn't be honest about himself or what he truly thought. He couldn't even meet in public. He was too ashamed to be fully known, too fearful of losing his credibility and status.

The woman at the well, however, has nothing to lose. She is flawlessly honest and authentic, despite the potential humiliation of being outed as having had five previous marriages and now living with a man she is not married to. Jesus does not criticise her for any of this, but he does praise her for speaking the truth. She is herself, without guile, without trying to protect her reputation, and this liberates her to respond wholeheartedly to what Jesus is saying: "I am the source of living water, a fountain of the Holy Spirit that gushes up within you."

Apparently unconcerned with what her neighbours think of her, the woman can respond to Jesus with wholehearted joy. Jesus has identified the woman's needs and failings, but gently, and it is her honest confession that frees her from being burdened by them and makes her able to become a witness for Jesus. "Come

and meet a man who told me everything I've ever done!" she cries, echoing the words that Jesus says to his first disciples – "Come and see."

Jesus is breaking all kinds of social and ethnic rules to speak with this woman, but the consequences are dramatic. She takes the good news of God's compassion back to her village and after Jesus and his disciples have stayed with them for two days, they all become convinced that Jesus is indeed the saviour – or more literally, 'life-giver' – that they've been waiting for. For this reason, the woman at the well has become known in many Churches as the evangelist to the Samaritans. The Orthodox and Catholic Churches even gave her a name – Photina, meaning luminous one.

Since then, many Christians have come to prayerfully imagine themselves in Photina's place. We may find it helpful to wonder what it would be like to be the woman at the well, an outsider having Jesus ask us for a cup of water.

This is the beautiful premise, that Jesus is thirsty, and we are the ones with the bucket. How will we respond? Do we offer our water to Jesus in open-hearted love, even though he looks like a potentially dangerous foreigner, and we don't know who he is? Sometimes our own salvation journey, our wholehearted conversion, may begin with a simple act of generosity to a stranger who turns out to be able to give us in return far more than we ever thought possible to long for.

If I'm honest, I think there is something missing from the Samaritan woman's testimony, some words that were perhaps at the forefront of her mind, but which were never spoken aloud. "Come and see a man who told me everything I ever did," she said, but might have added, "... and loved me anyway." She doesn't say these last four words, but the joy with which she runs to tell everyone about Jesus tells me that she has felt it. Suddenly she knows what it's like to be truly known by her creator, all her flaws exposed, and entirely loved anyway and found to be beautiful. In that moment, she truly sees God, she

receives Christ, and she leaps up to tell everyone about him. No one who has experienced this could possibly do otherwise.

So, my advice to you is keep your bucket handy. The person asking for a humble glass of water may be just about to change your life.