

Sermon for the Cathedral Eucharist | Third Sunday before Lent | 8 March 2026

Readings: Exodus 17.1-7, Romans 5.1-11, John 4.5-42

This third Sunday of Lent is framed by images of destruction across the middle east in the wake of the US and Israeli military offensive on Iran that began just over a week ago. The divisions between peoples, nations and religions, the barriers and tensions between cultures and civilisations are laid bare for all to see. The human cost is increasing and very few aspects of our lives will remain untouched over these next few weeks, months and indeed years.

The extended reading from St John's Gospel chapter 4 is also framed by images of destruction and division. The scene is the Well of Jacob. The backdrop is the Samaritan holy mountain of Gerizim and which bore the ruins of the temple that was destroyed a hundred years before the encounter between Jesus and the Samaritan woman. The Samaritan temple was a rival place of worship with the Jerusalem Temple and so bore the brunt of violence from Jerusalem's military forces in the late second century BC.

Jesus and the Samaritan woman negotiate their relationship carefully around the usually impermeable cultural barriers. Jesus should not have initiated a conversation with a woman on her own and whom he had never met before. Not only does Jesus cross the gender boundary but he steps into a space beyond all the religious and ethnic barriers of the time.

So let's not miss the backdrop and the radical nature of the encounter – but it's deeper than that, and I quote: 'they asked him to stay with them, and he stayed there. And many more believed because of his word. We know that this is truly the Saviour of the World'.

A community statement of faith – one of the high points in St John's Gospel. This is not just about individuals. A whole community experiences the transformation that the good news of Jesus brings to humanity.

And it's more than that: 'The hour is coming, and is now here.....', says Jesus, as the two of them debate the nature and location of worship. In the midst of the ruins of the holy mountain and in the space between two mutually alienated peoples, God is doing a new thing. Something deeply profound is happening in humanity and in this marginalised, stigmatised place called Samaria, God is intervening to change the world.

David Ford in his wonderful Lent Book this year, Meeting God in John, draws attention to one small detail in the narrative. As disciples come back to find Jesus talking to the Samaritan woman, astonished at what they saw, it's said: 'Then the woman left her water-jar and went back to the city'. David Ford draws attention to the tediousness of a woman's life at the time, constantly walking out to the city's well, carrying heavy water-jars, with all the hard physical exertion and burden it involved.

The woman literally leaves her old life behind her to join in the transformation of God's world and take part in God's plan of salvation. Like the disciples who left behind their fishing nets and boats. Leaving the water-jar behind is a visible sign of taking up a new life. Joining in with God who is doing a new thing.

What is it that we need to leave behind this Lent to join in with God's plan of salvation? How can our Lenten journey be 'the well of energy and action' as one writer has recently put it?

As we unpack the significance of the Samaritan woman for our Lenten journey let's compare her encounter with Jesus with the story of Nicodemus which we heard read to us last Sunday.

Nicodemus is a leader of Israel, a member of the establishment. The Samaritan woman is a member of a despised grouping, and as a woman a marginalised member within that group. Nicodemus meets Jesus by night, a symbol of unbelief in the one who is the light of the world and the Samaritan woman meets Jesus in the blazing hot

midday sun. It's a contrast between one who has difficulty believing and one open to the opportunities Jesus brings.

But what Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman do have in common is that they misunderstand what Jesus is saying, missing the symbolic language Jesus uses. Nicodemus can't understand what it means to be born of water and the Spirit from above. The Samaritan woman fails to comprehend what Jesus means by living water: how would Jesus produce this living water given that there is no visible bucket? Would this mean she wouldn't have to labour drawing water from Jacob's well again?

Fundamentally, the difference between Nicodemus and the Samaritan Woman is found in the conversation. As Jesus talks to Nicodemus the conversation draws to a halt, and we hear no more of what Nicodemus says or thinks. The Samaritan woman enters freely and openly into a dialogue. She might be diffident about her marital status but it's difficult to see how her response is deceitful.

The Samaritan woman encounters Jesus, the dialogue develops, she becomes a new disciple and witnesses to her local community, and Jesus is invited to stay. In the Greek language the word used is 'remain', or in older versions, 'abide'. Jesus 'remains with', 'he abides with', he makes his dwelling with a community that is despised and does this through a woman. Jesus shares with them at the deepest level, and there is personal and community transformation in understanding and belief.

But let's dwell for a few moments on the image of water. Jesus offers living water to satisfy the woman's spiritual thirst, her evident desire for God. If she accepts this water, she will find all her spiritual desires satisfied.

There is a lovely observation made by the medieval theologian St Thomas Aquinas. He wrote volume after volume on the Christian faith in often difficult to grasp thirteenth century language! But with

great clarity he said this about living water. He contrasts living water with what he calls 'non-living water'. 'Non-living water is water which is not connected or united with the source from which it springs', he wrote. 'Non-living water' is the stagnant water of the isolated pool, or rainwater

drying up in front of us. The point he makes is that if we receive the living water that Jesus offers then we also receive the source of that living water; and if we receive the source then we are drawn into the life of the source, the life of the spring itself. Living water is a picture of the Holy Spirit and the gift of the Spirit brings us into union with God, its eternal and never-ending source, spring and fountain.

There is, when we wrestle with St John's Gospel, always more to say, and you'll be relieved to know that I am not going to try and say it! Suffice it to remind us that the Samaritan woman left behind her water-jar and took on the role of evangelist to her community. Lent is never a matter simply leaving things behind, it must always be a matter of taking the next steps on the journey of faith, seeing the Lenten journey as 'the well of energy and action' as I said earlier.

In Lent we enter into the death and resurrection of Jesus and it's a long and sometimes heavy walk towards Jerusalem and to the suffering of the cross. As we journey though, we draw from those deep inner resources that God has given us so that our desires for ourselves, each other and for this world are reshaped. The power of the journey that Jesus makes is the power of love which alone has the power to change the human heart to desire nothing less than God.

In Lent the thirst that we have for God will grow and our weaknesses and shortcomings will become the place where God is most at work. In Lent we draw from the spring of the water of life, the gift of the Holy Spirit welling up within us who can re-shape the desires of our heart.

The complexities of our world are a challenge to sort out and always will be. Even to name the rights and wrongs, to determine what the right sort of actions are, to understand how barriers between human beings might be broken down, to see what peace might look like in realistic practical terms – only in humility are we able to enter into the debate.

What we do understand, however, is that the energy of following Jesus into his death and resurrection can enable us to build communities, to draw closer to each other, re-shape the desires of the heart towards peace and to join in with God in God's project of salvation. In the midst of the ruins of the world, in the midst of the brokenness and divisions of humanity the power of God's love is at work. That we can see this more clearly today we owe to the courage of the Samaritan woman in responding to the initiative of Jesus. Amen.

ii Liz Dodd, Along Walk in Solidarity, The Tablet, 28th February 2026

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