

The Encounter at the Well: John 4:1-9

In the early pages of John's Gospel we find Jesus deeply immersed in His own Jewish culture on mission to His own people, ministering in His own language, culture and religious heritage.

For example, in John 2 John the Baptist strides the desert regions of the Jordon as a wild prophet clothed in camel's skin in the tradition of the Old Testament Nazarite (John 1:19-34). We then have Jesus calling His disciples. Surprisingly, He bypasses the Temple and Rabbinical schools of Judea and heads for the shores lake Galilee to assemble His ministry team. Though they are a surprising lot in many ways, they are all Jews, from among Jesus' own people. After attending a very Jewish wedding (John 2:1-12), Jesus then cleanses the temple in Jerusalem, the core symbol of Jewish identity. (2:13-25). It does not get any more Jewish than this. To complete the picture of the deep engagement in the Jewish context, in chapter 3 Jesus then sits down with a Pharisee, one of Israel's teachers to talk about deep matters of faith. Jesus is a Jew, working among his own people, challenging them for sure, but nonetheless focused on his own culture, in His own language to His own people and religious traditions.

In John chapter 4 Jesus' direction changes dramatically. We find Jesus on the move as he travels from the Jewish heartland to the marginal region of Samaria. The transition between the chapters 3 and 4 is not only geographical. Jesus crosses barriers of culture, ethnicity, gender and social convention, to the amazement of all.

The dramatic change of direction is highlighted in the stark difference between the two individual people we meet in chapters 3 and 4. The Nicodemus we meet in 3 was a Pharisee, learned, powerful, respected, orthodox and theologically trained. The unnamed Samaritan woman Jesus would meet in chapter 4 was unschooled, without influence, despised, alone, and capable only of folk religion. He was a man, a Jew, a ruler; she was a woman, a Samaritan, and moral outcast. The only thing they had deeply in common was they both needed Jesus.

But how did Jesus get from one chapter to the next, one person to the other? How did such a radical step of mission take place?

In John 4 verses 1-3 begins the story. 'Now Jesus learned that the Pharisees had heard that he was gaining and baptising more disciples than John – although in fact it was not Jesus who baptised, but his disciples. So he left Judea and went back to Galilee.'

Jesus' influence was growing, even surpassing that of John the Baptist. John had attracted large crowds to hear his evocative preaching and many had been baptised in the Jordan River in response to his message. The Pharisees had heard and were deeply concerned. These are the one and same people who Jesus was in conflict with in chapter 2 and in conversation with in chapter 3. They fear the attractive power of the Galilean Rabbi. The time for direct confrontation with the religious elite will come later on in the Gospel. Jesus' hour had not yet come so He headed north.

'Now he had to go through Samaria.'

When John uses the language of "he had to go through Samaria" some suggest that the Gospel writer is using the language of divine appointment. Often it has been said that Jews did all they could to avoid the route through Samaria because of the history of conflict and shared antipathy toward one another. After all, Jewish pilgrims did encounter the open hostility of fruit and stone throwing and all kinds of pestering when on pilgrimage from the north to the south and back again. So it is believed that Jews commonly took a longer route around Samaria.

But the Jewish historian Josephus puts pay to this theory. In his work in *Antiquities of the Jews* it is clear that Jews and Samaritans did not much like each other; but Jews still commonly preferred the shorter three day journey through Samaria. A short cut is a short cut after all. Perhaps short cuts and divine appointments are not always mutually exclusive.

'So he came to a town in Samaria called Sychar, near the plot of ground Jacob had given to his Son, Joseph. Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired as he was from the journey, sat down by the well. It was about noon.'

So the journey had now begun in earnest and Jesus was said to be tired. In the verses above we see a beautiful glimpse of the reality of the incarnation. Earlier in the Gospel, John described Jesus in transcendent and glorious terms. Jesus is the *Word who was with God*, and *the Word that was God* (John 1:1), and *the Word who became flesh and tabernacled among us* (1:14). In verse 4-5 this glorious Word sits tired and thirsty cooked by a journey in the hot Sun. This is the God who Matthew called *Emmanuel 'God with us,'* or who Paul described in Philippians 2 as *"being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage, rather he made himself nothing by taking the nature of a servant, being made in human likeness."* Here in Jesus, God joins people tired and thirsty from the journey. He sits by a well that is still in existence today, tired and dusty, baking in the heat of day, waiting for a drink, ready to encounter whoever comes His way.

From then on, in the New Testament, we find the people of Jesus launching out under the propulsion of the Holy Spirit across cultures, language groups, and ethnicities to announce the Good News of Jesus. Whether it is the book of Acts' ever expanding narrative of the Gospel moving from Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, to the ends of the earth. Or it is Paul proclaiming in 1 Corinthians 9: 22 '*I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the Gospel that I might share in its blessings.*'

What can we learn from Jesus words, actions and disposition as he offers *living water* to a parched stranger so many years ago?

What are the implications for you, your church and its members in the way you live life, do ministry and make disciples?

As churches we are called to be on mission where we are uniquely placed in our communities and cultures to share with people just like us in our local setting.

But at the same time, don't be surprised if you feel the wind of the Spirit filling your sails and propelling you "across the tracks" to your Samarias or beyond; to cross barriers and borders, get passports, buy plane tickets and learn language and culture, build relationships and share the Good News of the barrier crossing God.