

## **The Man from Heaven meets an Outsider**

### **John 4:1-26**

I wonder whether you can think of a time when you truly felt like an outsider. Maybe it was when you started a new job, maybe it was when you moved house, maybe it was when you've been travelling.

I remember one summer I spent a couple of months teaching English in China and after landing in Beijing I hopped on an overnight train to Taiyuan in Shanxi province. Some of you would know the type of trains I'm talking about: three levels of bunks with no privacy. I was on the middle level with a couple of elderly Chinese on the level below. A couple of hours after the plane had landed and here I was, right in the middle of everyday Chinese culture on an overnight train heading into the country's interior.

The thing I remember most was being so frustrated at my lack of language skills. I was really interested in speaking to some of the other passengers but I couldn't speak Chinese and they couldn't speak English so it was a very quiet trip as far as speaking to the locals was concerned. I was definitely the outsider, and I remember how it made me feel a little anxious.

"What if I get lost? What if the guard asks me something and I can't answer? What if the train suddenly terminates and I don't know where else to go?"

Being the outsider can make for a nervous experience.

And travelling overseas isn't the only time when people can feel this way. Often when people look at the church they can very quickly feel that they don't belong: Perhaps from what they observe they conclude that the Christian faith is for people of a certain culture or race, perhaps after looking back over their own lives they see things that they think disqualify them from joining in. For a variety of reasons it's easy for people to think that Christ is beyond them.

In John Chapter 4 we meet one woman who could have easily thought this way. There are two things within her life that some could see as barriers to faith, but as Jesus encounters this woman we see that as far as he is concerned they form no barrier at all.

The first non-barrier in this encounter is introduced to us at the beginning of ch 4

Now Jesus learned that the Pharisees had heard that he was gaining and baptizing more disciples than John—<sup>2</sup> although in fact it was not Jesus who baptized, but his disciples. <sup>3</sup> So he left Judea and went back once more to Galilee. Now he had to go through Samaria. <sup>5</sup> So he came to a town in Samaria called Sychar, near the plot of ground Jacob had given to his son Joseph. <sup>6</sup> Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired as he was from the journey, sat down by the well. It was about noon. <sup>7</sup> When a Samaritan woman came to draw water, Jesus said to her, "Will you give me a drink?" <sup>8</sup> (His disciples had gone into the town to buy food.)

The quickest route from Jerusalem to Galilee was to go through Samaria. Samaria was a part of ancient Palestine that was occupied by a different cultural group to

the Jews, and Jews and Samaritans did not get on. We see just how tense the relationship was in other parts of the Bible. In Luke 9 we have the following scene recorded for us

<sup>52</sup>And Jesus sent messengers on ahead, who went into a Samaritan village to get things ready for him; <sup>53</sup>but the people there did not welcome him, because he was heading for Jerusalem.

<sup>54</sup>When the disciples James and John saw this, they asked, "Lord, do you want us to call fire down from heaven to destroy them?" <sup>55</sup>But Jesus turned and rebuked them.

We see three movements in this little scene recorded by Luke: first the Samaritans don't welcome Jesus because he is *going to Jerusalem*; second, Jesus' disciples up the ante by suggesting fire come down to swallow up the unwelcoming Samaritans; thirdly, Jesus breaks the cycle of hate by rebuking them for offering such a violent response.

And this refusal by Jesus to enter into racial warfare is repeated here in John.

Verse 7 When a Samaritan woman came to draw water, Jesus said to her, "Will you give me a drink?" <sup>8</sup>(His disciples had gone into the town to buy food.) <sup>9</sup>The Samaritan woman said to him, "You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?" (For Jews do not associate with Samaritans.)

This woman is obviously taken aback by Jesus' request. No Jew would have ever asked a Samaritan for a drink in this way before. What's even more startling is that we see in v11 that Jesus didn't have anything to draw water with. This means that he would have had to use the vessel used by the Samaritan woman – most Jews would have seen it as unclean.

The woman points out another cultural difference in v 20

Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you Jews claim that the place where we must worship is in Jerusalem.

But in response Jesus declares that the time for separate systems of worship is over.

<sup>21</sup>"Woman," Jesus replied, "believe me, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem... and v23

<sup>23</sup>Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in the Spirit and in truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. <sup>24</sup>God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in the Spirit and in truth."

Jesus is saying that geography and culture will no longer create any barrier to true worship of the Father. All you need is knowledge of the truth and the presence of God's Spirit and you can worship as a true child of God. Knowledge of the truth and presence of God Spirit; two vital ingredients which, we are told through scenes like this, are now available to everyone.

One of the strongest worship experiences I have ever encountered was when I was in China sharing in a communion service. The bread and wine were distributed in the same way as we do here but the whole congregation sang hallelujah, again and again and again.

The rest of the service was in Chinese so I didn't follow what was going on. But at least I knew the Hebrew word *hallelujah* (Praise God), and I knew the visual language of the bread and wine. And it was so moving to live out this truth that we

have here in John 4, that we worship neither on this mountain nor Jerusalem, neither in Sydney nor Shanxi province, but in Spirit and in Truth. Next time you travel, make it a priority to drop in on a local fellowship, I think you will be richly blessed.

And as far as our own local fellowship is concerned, I don't think we'd have any objection to this. Nonetheless, let's affirm again a desire to echo God's love in not establishing any racial barriers to fellowship. *This* is where multiculturalism ought to work best, because it's *here* that we worship the God who ignores those racial barriers.

What was the second possible barrier that woman could have faced? Well, Jesus starts to broach the issue in a very subtle way from verse 10:

"If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water." And again from verse 13:

"Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again,<sup>14</sup> but whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life."

Jesus speaks about the possibility of finding refreshment and satisfaction for all eternity. Just like a cool drink of water fills our need when we are thirsty, so too Jesus has something which can satisfy us for all eternity.

The woman is intrigued, verse 15 "Sir, give me this water so that I won't get thirsty and have to keep coming here to draw water."

And now Jesus gets to the nub of the issue "Go, call your husband and come back."<sup>17</sup> "I have no husband," she replied. Jesus said to her, "You are right when you say you have no husband.<sup>18</sup> The fact is, you have had five husbands, and the man you now have is not your husband. What you have just said is quite true."

Where was this Samaritan trying to find satisfaction? Could it be possible that she was attempting to find meaning and satisfaction through a series of failed relationships? These days we know a little bit about relationship addiction and the cycle that people find themselves in—going back to the same type of person, making the same type of mistake—and it's all in a misguided attempt to find inner peace. But that's a type of emotional well that simply doesn't satisfy. Just like you have to keep going back to a well to fill up your bucket, so might we find that moving from one relationship to another is just as unfulfilling. Instead, Jesus points to where long-lasting satisfaction can be found: in the eternal life which he offers to all those who believe in him.

I admit that the offer of eternal life doesn't easily satisfy a lot of our longings; it's a life belonging to another age and so we won't feel that satisfaction until we arrive. But until then we have to let this woman's testimony speak to us. Five times she's tried the quick relational fix and it didn't work! It seems to me that the only thing it left her with was a sense of shame. You notice how she wants to change the topic in verse 20? It may be that some of us are living with the shame of a checkered

relational history. You might be thinking that you've found a reason to despise yourself, or at least you've found reason for Jesus and his people to despise you.

But just like Jesus shows himself to be bigger than *racial hatred*, this encounter also teaches us that he's bigger than *moral shame*. There's a great story told by a preacher named Matt Chandler that helps me visualize this wonderful truth. He tells the story of attending a church service where the preacher was teaching about sexual holiness. And to demonstrate why it was a good thing to maintain sexual purity the preacher produced a rose and gave it to a woman in the front row, and he asked the woman to look at it and pass it along the row. And then he goes back to his sermon and towards the end of his sermon he stops, looks up and says *Where's that rose? Where is it?* By this stage the rose had made its way to the back of the building. And it's been handled and petals have turned brown and they're falling off. And he says *'See this is what happens to your sexuality when you pass it around. It gets ruined. I mean who would want to be given a rose in this condition. Who would want it?'* And Matt Chandler says that he felt like standing up and shouting *'Jesus wants it! Jesus wants the rose!'*

And it's true! He's not turned off by our past failures, rather he has a place for all those who would turn and believe: no matter their race, no matter their history.

## **The Man from Heaven prompts a testimony**

### **John 4:27-42**

Friends one of the expectations that Jesus has of his church is that we have a concern for the lost, for those who are yet to know and believe in Jesus Christ.

We express this concern through a variety of ways: we support a number of missionaries who work in different contexts to our own, we pray for those living in our city and local area, we explain who Jesus is whenever we open the bible and from time to time we explicitly call people to make a commitment, we run courses like Christianity Explored, all these are good things to do and we trust that the Holy Spirit is using them.

But there is one more thing we can do, one more thing that *each one of us* can do, and that's to be ready to give personal testimony as to who Jesus is and what he has done for us. In 1 Peter 3:15 says this: Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. So in this second mini sermon I want to talk with you about giving testimony. To help us we're going to follow the woman at the well after her interaction with Jesus. What can we learn from her? Let's see

John Ch 4 picking things up from verse 28: leaving her water jar, the woman went back to the town and said to the people, <sup>29</sup> "Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did. Could this be the Messiah?" <sup>30</sup> They came out of the town and made their way toward him.

First thing we can learn: giving testimony can be really simple. This woman's testimony is only 16 words! "Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did. Could this be the Messiah?" A little later in the passage John repeats the woman's testimony in an even shorter form: verse 39, He told me everything I ever did 7 words! And this is all a testimony needs to be: a short statement of what God has done for you.

Some people say that testimonies are more complex than that, that a proper testimony is a story in three parts: Who you were before, how you met Jesus, and what's happened since then. And these stories are great to hear and great to relate when you get the chance. But you see that's the problem; you don't always get the chance to tell your whole story so often vast tracts of time can go by without us saying much at all!

I think there's a lesson here in being willing just to say something brief as the opportunities arise within our conversations. So the woman said "He told me everything I ever did..." What might you have to say? "I prayed and God answered by doing this..." "I used to feel guilty, but now I know God's forgiveness..." "At church we spoke about how Jesus accepts all races..."

Here's a tip, practice by testifying to each other. Evangelism is a skill that you need to practice, and if you can't testify about God's work to other Christians, then you're not going to be able to testify to the lost, I wouldn't think.

Notice also that the woman's testimony ends in a question. "Could this be the Messiah? Asking questions is a great way to engage with others. It's just a question, it's not an attack or a bible bash, it's a very friendly way of communicating. "Do you ever find yourself praying?" "Did you know that Jesus broke down racial barriers?" "Did you realize Jesus loves imperfect people?"

Giving testimony is not complex, nor does it have to be theologically complete. There's a lot more to Jesus than what this woman relates. But she does know she retells and it's used in a mighty way.

Second things we learn: testimonies are needed for the time of harvest. The woman has gone back to the town and Jesus is left with his disciples. The disciples get all flustered about the food situation, but Jesus is thinking about more spiritual things: Second half of verse 35: open your eyes and look at the fields! They are ripe for harvest; possibly a reference to the crowds of Samaritans coming to see him. "Get ready you disciples, we're about to bring people into the Kingdom!" Elsewhere in the Bible Jesus tells us that the *harvest is plentiful*.

God is always enlarging his church by bringing men and women to faith. Don't ever think that the church is some kind of dinosaur or ancient relic; God is always working, and there are people who will become Christians even if they don't know it yet. Could your testimony be the tool that he uses? Are you willing to dust it off and

see what God does with it? You might just be pleasantly surprised because it is harvest time after all.

And when you dust it off, you ought to be prepared to simply be one part of the whole process. The third lesson is that our testimonies work within a larger framework of evangelism. In verse 37, Jesus says 'Thus the saying 'One sows and another reaps' is true. <sup>38</sup> I sent you to reap what you have not worked for. Others have done the hard work, and you have reaped the benefits of their labor.' Who had done the work before the disciples? Maybe he's referring to Moses who the Samaritans revered as a prophet, maybe he's referring to the Samaritan woman herself who'd done the initial work bringing her townsfolk to Jesus and his disciples.

Either way, evangelism is a team effort. Once you've testified, introduce your friend to another Christian and see what impact they have. Send them a mp3 or a video clip of a sermon that you've found useful. Your testimony might only be a seed, but that seed can germinate further on down the track. You notice from verse 40 that Jesus spends a few days with these folk and his own words have their own affect, many more became believers (v41). For some Samaritans the woman's testimony was enough, but for others it was the woman who got them interested and they believed upon hearing Jesus himself. That's ok, it's a team effort. The question is whether we are willing to play our part, to give testimony as to what God has done.

Start by practicing with each other.