

Are you thirsty?

We all get thirsty. And no matter how much we drink when we are thirsty, we know we're going to be thirsty again.

And being thirsty is an entirely natural thing. We need water.

And it's usually really easy to deal with thirst. Certainly, for us here in Sydney, and generally in Australia, we can get hold of something to drink. We got a bit concerned a few years ago, but I checked this week and Warragamba Dam is 97% full.

In some parts of the world it is a struggle, but even in those places, finding water is generally easier than the other needs of life. Easier than finding food, easier than finding shelter, easier than finding safety.

Even if we're not thirsty right now – and I'm certainly not – we can all relate to it. To being thirsty. And dealing with it.

The opening of today's reading from John's gospel revolves around thirst – something that we can all relate to.

Jesus has left Judea and is heading back to Galilee and he cuts through Samaria. That part of the world has always been a mixing pot of people and cultures, and although they have often been in conflict, they've also been engaged in trade, and travel through each other's territories and so on. And culturally they had – and have – a lot of things in common, as well as having plenty of differences.

So Jesus and his disciples come to the Samaritan city of Sychar, and they stop at Jacob's well. The disciples head off into the city for food, and Jesus chooses to wait at the well. Middle of the day, no one's around – it's too hot to carry water so most people stay away. So it's time out for Jesus – time away from the crowds, and even from his disciples.

But oddly a woman comes along to draw water from the well. She's a Samaritan, which is not odd, because the well is just outside a Samaritan city, but it is odd to be there in the middle of the day.

And it would be odd for her to find a Jewish man sitting there, and odder still that he asks her for a drink.

Verse 9 gives her reaction: The Samaritan woman said to him, "You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?" and explains, "(For Jews do not associate with Samaritans)." They don't share eating and drinking, they don't associate with each other and so on – but they do, share a common heritage. The history goes way back. If you go back about 900 years before Christ, the united kingdom of Israel got divided, split in two. The southern kingdom became known as Judah, with the palace of the Davidic kings and the temple of the Lord remaining in Jerusalem. The northern tribes, however, the ones that broke off, set up a new capital with a new king, in the city of Samaria. And they also set up a couple of rival shrines.

Then, a couple of hundred years later, about 700 B.C., the northern kingdom was conquered by the Assyrian army. The people of those northern tribes were dispersed, scattered around the Mediterranean world. And the Assyrians then brought in other peoples to live in that area they had conquered. This was intentional, because it would have the effect of breaking down the national identity of the people they had conquered, those who remained in the land.

Over time, the people there intermarried, and the ethnic identity and solidarity of the nation was weakened. And their religious identity eroded as well.

And these people were the Samaritans, and this woman at the well was one of them. So she asks Jesus: You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?"

Jesus doesn't address her concern at all, but he starts to tell her who he is, and he does it by continuing this imagery around water and being thirsty. "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 I think it's sort of like the conversation we heard about last week, when Nicodemus came to visit Jesus, when Jesus told Nicodemus that he needed to be born again, and Nicodemus tried to build a better understanding by asking questions.

Nicodemus asked how someone could enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born [again] (3:4), and now the Samaritan woman asks "you have nothing to draw with and the well is deep. Where can you get this living water?" Good question. Perhaps.

She asks Jesus if he's greater than Jacob who made the well. And she refers to Jacob as 'our ancestor' because Jacob – who took the name 'Israel' – is ancestor to both the Jews – including Jesus – and to the Samaritans.

Jesus doesn't answer her question, instead, he tells her about the living water that he's offering: "Everyone who drinks this water [the water from the well] will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst."

And what's more:

"Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life."

The Samaritan woman is convinced: "Sir, give me this water..." she says, so that she doesn't have to keep coming back to the well. So she hasn't quite got that the living water that Jesus satisfies a different thirst from the one that brings her to the well each day, but she knows that it is desirable.

Then Jesus tells the woman to go and get her husband.

And it seems that she's caught Jesus out: "I have no husband" she says.

But Jesus is one step ahead – The fact is, you have had five husbands, and the man you now have is not your husband.

And that knowledge convinces the woman: “I see that you’re a prophet”!

Now, we don’t know how the woman came to have five husbands. But it seems that she was divorced five times (because she’s not referred to as a widow, which would be the other explanation). And for a Samaritan woman to be divorced five times in that era it is likely that she couldn’t conceive. And if she couldn’t have children, a man would have been within his rights to divorce her.

So rather than her being someone who “collected” husbands, it’s likely she was getting more and more desperate over time. And her situation would have been more or less known, and generally frowned upon. That’s all speculation, but it fits what we do know, and it explains why the woman would have been going to the well in the middle of the day – because that’s when it’s quiet, when there’ll be no one else there to hassle her.

The woman is very much convinced of Jesus’ importance. But still there’s this Jewish – Samaritan divide: “Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you Jews claim that the place where we must worship is in Jerusalem” (4:20). The Samaritans traditionally worshiped on the mountain tops – in the high places, whereas the nation of Israel was centred on the temple in Jerusalem.

In response, Jesus explains to her that things are changing; , a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem (4:21). The place of worship is not going to be important – but the object of worship is. Salvation, Jesus explains, is coming from the Jews – it’s coming through the line of the kingdom of Israel – through the Jewish people, but it’s not limited to those people.

Jesus concludes by saying “God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in the Spirit and in truth.”

Worship, Jesus says, is not about where it takes place – whether in the temple, or a synagogue or on a mountain top – or I guess even a church – and it’s not about ritual and liturgy and priests and robes, it’s about people coming together, to worship in spirit and in truth.

It’s breaking down the old ideas of worship that had developed in both the Jewish and Samaritan cultures, and opening them up: not just to Jewish people. Not just to Samaritan people. But to all people. I’m not sure, but I’m guessing that not too many of us here can claim either Jewish or Samaritan backgrounds.

Jesus is telling the Samaritan woman how God’s promises to Abraham back in Genesis 12:2-3 are being worked out. “I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you [...]and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed”

The woman says she knows the messiah is coming, and that when he does he will proclaim everything.

Then Jesus confirms who he is: “I, the one speaking to you—I am he.” (4:26)

Unfortunately, though, we don't get to read of the Samaritan woman's reaction to Jesus' statement, because "just then" the disciples arrive on the scene. They were surprised that he was speaking with a woman [-let alone a Samaritan woman-], but no one said, "What do you want?" or, "Why are talking speaking with her?" (4:27)

None of the disciples spoke to her. None of them offered her some of the food they'd brought back from the city. Here was a woman who had effectively become a follower of Jesus, just like them, but none of them said anything.

And the woman left the well, leaving her water jar behind.

She went back to the city, and shared the good news, and invited people to come to Jesus: "Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did. Could this be the Messiah?"

Could he be the messiah? The one that the Samaritans, as well as the Jewish people, had long been waiting for. She asked the question, but the from the way she asked it, she was pretty certain of the answer.

The Samaritan people seemed open to the idea: We read in verse 30 that they left came out of the town and made their way toward him.

So, it seems this Samaritan woman was the first woman to follow Jesus as the messiah. And she's the first non-Jew.

And she's the first evangelist too. She comes to know Jesus, and she shares that news – that good news – with the people of the town.

As we look forward, verse 39, tells us "Many of the Samaritans from that town believed in him because of the woman's testimony..."

And when the Samaritans from Sychar came to Jesus (4:40), they urged him to stay with them; and he stayed there two days. And Jesus teaching to them caused many more Samaritans to believe.

We can admire what the Samaritan woman did in coming to understand who Jesus was, and daring to explain it to her own people, and we who are followers of Jesus are encouraged to do exactly that.

We need to remember, though, that it's Jesus who changes lives, not the person who shares the good news. Not our convincing words or eloquent speeches or good actions

And the Samaritans say as much to the woman in verse 42, "We no longer believe just because of what you said; now we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this man really is the Saviour of the world.."

We can be witnesses to Jesus. We can speak eloquently and act bravely, and do all sorts of good things in the name of Jesus. As a church we can have great events and provide great services and resources to the wider community.

But in the end, it's not our actions that change peoples' lives, it is Jesus.

And I think that's heartening: It is great to be part of sharing the good news of Jesus, but in the end, the sharing of the good news is not dependent on me. Or on any of us. We might fail – but the good news goes on.

We might share the living water with those that are thirsty, but we need to remember that we are not the source of that living water.

Echoing this exchange with the Samaritan woman, in Chapter 7 of John's gospel, Jesus says, "Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink. As the scripture has said, 'Out of the believer's heart shall flow rivers of living water.'"

Are you thirsty? The living water is there for you.

At the end of January, we were reminded in the sermon on the mount "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. (Matt 5:6).

Do you know someone who's thirsty? Because it's our privilege to be able to share the living water that Jesus has given us.

At the moment, the people of Sydney have plenty of water.

But even if we could drink it all, we'd still be thirsty again.

But the living water that Jesus offers us, through his death and resurrection, is satisfying and fulfilling permanently. And, if we accept it, out of our hearts will flow rivers of living water.

The living water is on offer today...and always.

Do you know anyone who's thirsty?

Or are you thirsty?

Amen.