

You will never be thirsty again

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You are on the therapist's couch. You are trying to tell the story of your life in a language you can live with. You settle on one verb that crystallises the aspirations of our age. That verb is 'complete'. You say, 'I am longing for completeness, for wholeness, for resolution, for the wheel to come full circle.' Perhaps a friend or relative has died suddenly. You are left with conversations unfinished, projects incomplete, hopes unfulfilled. You are immersed in grief. That grief is a restless and sometimes fruitless struggle to restore a sense of completeness.

For Jews of Jesus' time, one number epitomized this sense of completeness, and that was the number seven. God made the world in seven days. Jacob served seven years for Rachel. Pharaoh's dream had seven fat and seven thin cows. The traditional menorah candlestick had seven lights. Joshua marched around Jericho seven times on the seventh day – and so on, endlessly. Seven was the complete number.

And if seven was perfect, then six was just that painful little bit short of seven. In the story of the wedding at Cana, remember, there were six pitchers of water for the rites of purification. Not quite perfect.

And the story of the Samaritan woman is a story of a woman that has had five husbands, and is currently living with a man who is not her husband. This is not a salacious piece of gossip. These details are vital to the understanding of the story. We are talking about five bad marriages and one uneasy partner. That makes six.

Samaritans and Jews had hated each other for centuries. Samaria was full of all kinds of ethnic groups with their numerous religious cults. It had been since the eighth century, when the Assyrians invaded the northern kingdom of Israel. Over time the Samaritans developed an uneven but bitter contest with the Jews. The Samaritans worshiped God on Mt Gerizim. The Jews insisted that the centre of their faith was the Temple in Jerusalem, fifty miles to the south. 2 Kings 17 gives an account of the Assyrian invasion. It lists five kinds of foreign peoples that worshiped idols in Samaria. Now the story starts to make sense. We can see the Samaritan woman's five husbands as representing the five false gods the Samaritans had worshiped.

And who is the sixth husband, the one to whom the woman is not married? Well, there are histories of Jesus' time. One historian tells us that Herod the Great turned the capital of Samaria into a Roman city called Sebaste. Sebaste was the Greek name for the Emperor Augustus. Herod filled Sebaste with 6000 colonial settlers. But the historian makes an interesting observation. He notes that the Samaritans did not intermarry with the settlers in the way they had under the Assyrians. Hence Jesus' words 'and the one you have now is not your husband.' So this woman represents the Samaritan people. Jesus is pointing out that the Samaritans are historically and spiritually devoted to five false gods, and now, politically, subjected to Roman power. These are the six husbands.

And at this point we realize that Jesus and the Samaritan woman are enacting a courtship ritual. It is a ritual that is rooted in the foundational stories of Israel's faith. Isaac, Jacob and Moses all met their wives by loitering at a well and having a conversation there. In each of the patriarchal stories a man comes to a well in a foreign country, finds a maiden there, and asks for a drink; each time she runs back to fetch her people, who return with her, approve of the man and witness the wedding. This is a conventional scene. When we see a cartoon mouse run over the edge of a cliff, we know what will

happen next. We know the mouse will keep running in mid air for a while, then stop, then plummet towards the ground, then stretch out a hand just in time and clasp himself back up the cliff. A scene between a man and a woman at a well is like this. We think we know it will end in marriage. Surely Jesus is not going to marry this low-living Samaritan woman? Well, yes and no. Don't worry, he's not going to abandon his ministry to settle for suburban obscurity in a three-bedroomed condo in Sychar. He's not going to fall for the woman's weary chat-up line 'I'm available, darling, but you need to know I'm experienced.' No – the point of the courtship scene is quite simple. Jesus is the Samaritan woman's seventh husband. Assyria could not save her; neither could Rome. But Jesus can, and does. He is the seventh heaven. He is the completeness, the resolution, the fulfillment of her and her people's restless searching. He is the answer to their unquenchable thirst.

And that brings us to the water. The story starts with a woman who has a bucket, yet no water, and Jesus, who has no bucket, yet is never thirsty. From here develops a conversation that shows exactly who Jesus is and why he is her saviour and ours. The important thing to realize is a note about the language. When the woman talks about the well she refers to it as a cistern, containing still, maybe stagnant water. When *Jesus* talks about water he is talking about a gushing, overflowing fountain of life, a bursting geyser shooting up to the skies. The Old Testament passage that lies behind this interchange is from Jeremiah 2: "Thus says the Lord: 'What wrong did your ancestors find in me that they went far from me, and went after worthless things, and became worthless themselves? ... My people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, the fountain of living water, and dug out cisterns for themselves, cracked cisterns that can hold no water.'"

The woman has two problems. The first is that the water she is drawing is not very good water. The second is that however much she draws, she remains thirsty. It's just like her situation with her husbands. Her five husbands have not nourished her, and her sixth still leaves her thirsty. Let's keep the focus on the full religious and political context of this story. Jesus is saying the Samaritans' worship of false gods has been like a stagnant cistern, poisonous and debilitating to their life. And meanwhile their subjection to Rome is leaving them perpetually thirsty, unable to break out of the cycle of hand-to-mouth dependence that occupies their whole existence. Like the woman, they are humiliated on a daily basis. But here is Jesus, in the desert of desire, offering water that never runs out and completeness that quenches all thirst.

So this is what verses 5-18 mean. Jesus is the seventh husband who delivers Samaria from the false worship of Assyria – the five husbands – and political subjection to the sixth husband, Rome. He brings a fountain of living water that exposes the squalor of idolatry and breaks the daily dependence on the oppressor. This is a story about the religious and political transformation all people can find in Christ.

So if neither Assyria nor Rome can save us, who can? Jesus and the woman now get into a conversation about correct worship. I wonder whether this might be a conversation rather pertinent to our own age. Many of us gathering today to meet God, in grand buildings like this one, could be saying to ourselves, 'we may not be all that sure who we've come to worship and what difference it makes, but what we do know is that sure as anything we worship well.' That's what the woman is saying. 'Come and look at my tradition – we've got great buildings, fantastic music, an amazing spectacle, touching sermons, droves of people, carefully performed sacraments, and we've got plenty of money.' And Jesus says to her. 'Maybe so. But this is not about you. This is about God. And you know that God chose the Jews. So if you're going to be reconciled with God, you have to be reconciled with the Jews, like it or not. One day, maybe soon, all these buildings and traditions and their beauty and splendour will be swept away. And it won't be about Samaria, and it won't be about Jerusalem, and it won't be about Duke Chapel: it'll just be about God. You'll be face to face with God. Spirit and truth. That's all.

Now the woman is beginning to get the hang of this. She says, 'Yes, I know someone is coming who will make all these things happen. One day.' And Jesus looks at her and says, 'Here. Now. Me.' Face to face with God.

Here. Now. Me. It's awesome. ...

And just then the disciples spoil it by bursting in. They ruin this sacred moment of spirit and truth. Of course they're horrified to see what Jesus seems to be up to. This is the moment where the story moves from revelation to its consequences. This is changeover from who Jesus is to the difference he makes. And the disciples are the fall guys. They come back from Sychar and they're dead pleased with themselves that they've successfully got away from an unclean city with food but without defiling themselves. You know the feeling when you're in a foreign country and you're not sure of the language but somehow you succeed in buying what you were sent to get from the general store. You come back expecting a standing ovation.

But just look at what the woman does. Immediately she leaves her water jar. That water jar is the symbol of her daily economic subjection to fetching water for survival. That jar represents her social humiliation of having to do so in the heat of the noonday, because her life had made her an outcast. That jar tells her, every moment of every day, she is trash. She leaves it behind, because now she has found *living* water, and she'll never be thirsty again. Then straightaway she becomes an evangelist. She uses the key words that back in chapter one brought the first disciples to faith: 'Come and see.' And through her testimony many people from the city believe in Jesus. And astonishingly, Jesus, the loyal Jew, is invited to stay with the Samaritans for two days. That means he must eat with them – which at the beginning of the story it said he would never do. The story is telling us that the enmity between Jew and Samaritan is over. The dividing wall of hostility has come tumbling down.

What a devastating contrast. The woman returned with faith, truth, testimony, transformation, and reconciliation on an epic scale. The disciples meanwhile returned with... food. But Jesus is merciful on his male disciples. He doesn't humiliate them, or ridicule their morning's work. He has just transformed the woman's idea of what it meant to drink. Now he transforms the disciples' notion of what it means to eat. Living water enabled the woman and her people to break free from centuries of spiritual confusion and the present reality of political oppression. Now unknown food, 'food to eat that you do not know about', offers the disciples a chance to share Christ's glory.

Even though the disciples have left the settled agrarian life to follow Jesus, they know two things about food. They know that ploughing and tilling and sowing are mighty hard work. And they know that none of that work bears any fruit till harvest time. Remember the woman had two problems with water. Well, the disciples have two problems with food. It's hard work and you have to wait for it. These if you think about it are what one might regard as the two problems with salvation. It's hard work and you have to wait for it. But as he did with the woman, Jesus sweeps the disciples' two problems away. It's not hard work, because Jesus has done all the labour, and the disciples only have to reap. "I sent you to reap that for which you did not labour. Others have laboured, and you have entered into their labour". And they don't have to wait, because the fields are ripe – the harvest is *now*. "Look around you, and see how the fields are ripe for harvesting". In a stroke Jesus has taken away all that stands between us and salvation. It's not hard work, because he has done all the hard work for us. And we don't have to wait for it. The harvest is now.

So this is a story about completion. But it is not like the completion we look for on the therapist's couch. It is not about *our* completion. It is about *God's* completion in Jesus. Jesus is the seventh husband who delivers the Samaritans from religious perversion and political oppression. He is the fountain of life who delivers the sinner from daily humiliation and the marginalized from perpetual thirst. He is the true place of encounter that brings God and his people face to face. He is the reconciling grace that makes enemies into friends. He offers a way of life that lifts the labour of salvation off our shoulders and brings its joy to us now. He calls this well of salvation living water and

this abundant harvest unknown food. When we read this story, we discover that our unquenchable thirst is over and our gnawing hunger gone. We realise that, in Jesus, we have met God face to face. And we say, with the Samaritans, 'We have heard for ourselves, and we know, that this is truly the Saviour of the world.'