

Touching Points and Entry Ways

Pitt Street Uniting Church, Sunday 18 July, 2021

A Reflection by Rev Penny Jones

Pentecost 7B

Contemporary Reading from '*River*' by Denise Levertov; John 4: 5-29

This worship service can be viewed on You Tube at <https://pittstreetuniting.org.au/spirit/reflections/>

I have always loved this story, which has so many layers of interpretation. We have diverted from the lectionary today, so that we can look at it in association with Corinne Ware's work on the Spirituality Wheel – a tool that helps us better understand our preferred forms of spirituality, and how these can aid or hinder our encounter with the divine. We will come back to this slide in our faith education session later this morning. For now, just notice that we have four main ways of approaching our spiritual life, through our head, our heart, our soul and our community.

We will each tend to favour one of these over the others. Some lend themselves to a theology of transcendence, some to one of immanence. Some lean towards outward expression, some more to internal. Each produces different kinds of liturgical approach and different preferences for personal prayer. All of them will be present in a good liturgy or a good story. Today's story, like all good stories, offers entry points for all of us, as we play with it in different ways and allow different aspects to reveal themselves.

The Orthodox church venerates the woman at the well as Photina, who with her four daughters went to Rome, converted the daughter of the notorious emperor Nero, before ironically meeting with martyrdom by being cast into a well.

Today I give your warning that I want to share with you the 'R' rated version of this story – a version to which no scholarly commentary yet attests, and around which no tradition clings. Yet it is a version that I can see – and perhaps can help you to see too. What I offer here is, I suppose, in the tradition of Jewish narrative Midrash – the offering of an explanation. What follows is not intended for children!

It was the performance of a group of Aboriginal dancers which first gave me the clue as to a different interpretation of this story, which I thought I knew so well. They danced the story of the temptations of Christ, as told in the synoptic gospels. They took the parts of Jesus, the devil, and the Holy Spirit. The devil was danced by a woman. (I could at this point easily be drawn down the byways of feminist theology, the problems to women caused by dualism within Christianity that will always place the female on the bad, fleshly, foolish side of the Platonistic binary – but let's just not do that, today). The devil was danced by a woman – with much sensuousness. And it was the tenderness of the interaction with Jesus, the sensuality of the exchanges and the sheer passion and humanness that I later recognised when I read today's story with new eyes.

Then there was the exchange at a *lectio divina* or 'divine reading' group. As many of you will know, in such groups, those reading a short passage of scripture are invited to listen inwardly for the word or phrase that speaks to them, and to name it aloud. While taking part in a group using this passage two of us tried to speak our word or phrase at the same time, and as we were laughing about that there came out a light hearted, slightly flirtatious exchange – from one of the men: "*Woman*" - and in response, from one of the women, "*sir, you have no bucket and the well is deep*". And I suddenly recognised how potentially racy and erotic this particular bit of dialogue actually is. Its eroticism is somewhat buried in the ambiguity of the Greek text which we miss in English – but if we were to translate the word 'well' with the word 'shaft' we would come closer to the power of the original.

Many scholars now attest that it is likely that the woman in the exchange was a prostitute – whether literally or symbolically, after the manner of many references in the Hebrew prophetic literature to the idolatry of Israel, need not detain us for the moment. The story tells us she has had multiple relationships. Moreover, she questions why Jesus would talk with her, a woman and a Samaritan – surely even a Jew seeking a whore would not sink that low and the disciples on their return are astonished that he is speaking with her, in defiance of every rabbinical code that forbade talking with women.

It is perhaps worth taking just a brief side journey here into the relationships between Jews and Samaritans. Most of us have picked up along the way that Jews and Samaritans did not like each other much, hence the total offensiveness of Jesus's story of the 'good Samaritan'. What we need to understand is that the Samaritans descended from the native Israelites that were not deported at the fall of the Northern Kingdom in 722, along with some foreigners brought in by the Assyrian conquerors. The Jews of the south disliked them because they would not worship in Jerusalem, preferring their own temple at Mount Gerizim, that the Jewish high priest proceeded to burn to the ground in 128 BC. A Jewish regulation of AD 65-66 warned that one could never count on the ritual purity of a Samaritan woman since they were menstruants from the cradle! Hence the Gospel writer's assertion that Jews and Samaritans share nothing in common is an understatement at best, and most probably a euphemism for harsher practices towards the Samaritans by Jews. Samaritans occupied an outcast, third space – they were neither Jew nor Gentile and despised by all. We can, I am sure, think of many other such groupings in our world today.

So back to this particular woman. For while background may appeal to our intellect, it is the particularity, the embodiment that is going to engage our hearts and wills. This woman is collecting water at noon, by herself. Why? Women collect water at dawn and dusk when it is cool and they do so in groups. For this woman to be collecting at noon, by herself suggests that she is ashamed, outcast and perhaps up to something else. In our terms, she may well be sexually or gender diverse, or otherwise ostracised from a group that is already well on the margins of polite society. And Jesus is hanging around this well, at the time when, as we know perhaps from Australian rural experience, the men have finished work for siesta time, and some are perhaps on the lookout for a woman with whom to spend a few hours in the heat of the day. And Jesus does not have a bucket, so he's not looking for water; understandably enough then she assumes he is after something else.

When Jesus suggests that she has no husband he is not using any supernatural power – he is merely expressing the absolutely obvious. The '*sir I see you are a prophet*', becomes not (as we have perhaps heard it in the past, an insight into Jesus's true nature – unlikely in any case from a Samaritan, because the Samaritan faith recognised only the Torah, the first five books of the Hebrew Bible and not the prophetic literature).

No, not an expression of admiration, but something highly ironic – *‘well doh, tell me something I don’t know!’*. This interpretation is further reinforced by the woman’s use of the word ‘phrear’ for ‘well’, rather than the more natural ‘puge’. ‘Puge’ means a naturally occurring spring, whereas ‘phrear’ means a shaft deliberately dug – with its sexual overtones, and its resonance with temptation, for this is the word Homer uses for the descent to Hades.

The opening dialogue then reads rather like a salacious game of consequences;

Jesus met

A hooker

At Kings Cross

He said to her

‘Let me have some’

She said to him

‘Stooping a bit low aren’t we’

He said

‘I don’t think so’

She said

‘You fancy yourself, but I’d like to see the colour of your money’

We miss this interpretation because we really don’t want to see Jesus in this light. Nor – in so far as we identify with the woman – do we want to see ourselves, or the church (or in Jewish iconography, the people of Israel) in this light. However it begins to make more sense when we read it in the light of the pattern of the temptation story as we receive it from Matthew, Mark and Luke.

In their stories the baptism of Jesus is immediately followed by Jesus being driven into the wilderness where the three temptations of flesh, power and idolatry are overcome, and angels then minister to Jesus as the devil departs – a highly symbolic story. That story is then followed by the beginning of Jesus’s ministry in Galilee. It has always been assumed that John has no temptation story. We know for example that John has no story of the last supper, yet produces a profound meditation on the last supper in the form of the *‘I am the Bread of Life’* discourse around the feeding of the five thousand, which we will explore during August. I believe that this fourth chapter of John’s gospel does exactly the same thing with the temptation narrative – because this is what, John, writing so much later with the benefit of the other accounts loves to do. He loves to take the original story and spin it a different way; invite the reader to enter it more deeply; use it as an entry point for something else.

The basic placement pattern from the synoptic gospels is preserved. The incident occurs directly after the baptism and before Jesus begins a ministry in Galilee. John says that Jesus *‘had to pass through Samaria’* – ie through the wilderness! There he encounters this woman, who indeed presents the very same three temptations, to the flesh, in the form of a very explicit sexual offer to a human being described as *‘weary’*; to power *‘are you greater than our ancestor Jacob who gave us this well – then give me this water, I’ll follow you forever!’*; and to idolatry because her five husbands whom Jesus identifies, symbolically represent the household gods of the five Assyrian cities that colonised Samaria, rendering Samaritan worship impure. The Hebrew word for husband *ba’al*, master or lord, was also used as the name for a pagan deity, which is why the woman’s current ‘husband’ is not really her husband ie is a false god in Jewish terms.

When the three temptations are overcome the disciples appear, just like the angels in the synoptic accounts, bringing food. And the woman, just like the devil, departs - leaving her water jar. Now that is no instance of eyewitness local colour - this is John who never uses a word idly - she leaves behind the tool of her trade, her means of soliciting custom.

However, John's meditation on the synoptic temptation story - if this is what it is - goes further. Notice that Jesus initiates the conversation. "*Give me a drink*". Sounds innocuous perhaps, but so does, "*have you got a light?*". Moreover behind this request lies a statement that the alert reader will recognise at once when it occurs in the passion narrative, "*I am thirsty*" - and it is of course no accident that this encounter with the woman occurs at the sixth hour - the hour when Jesus will be handed over to be crucified. This is Jesus at his lowest point; needy, dependant, to some degree helpless. By the end of the encounter all that has shifted and he is declaring himself to be the messiah in the most highly exalted language possible - the ego eimi, I am who I am language as it appears in the Septuagint. He is also saying that he will see his father's work to completion - using the same Greek word which he will use on the cross to say "*it is accomplished, completed, finished*". The parallelism with the passion narrative is inescapable and shows the same dynamic - a movement through testing and desolation to glory and transformation. For the woman this means that she too is transformed - from temptress to evangelist.

She would of course not be the first prostitute to save the people of Israel - think of Rahab; she would certainly not be the first prostitute to become a considerable evangelist if we accept the muddying of the reputation of Mary Magdalene by the tradition. But what the story of this woman, this Samaritan woman and her encounter with Jesus at a well does is to upset all the binaries; all the accepted norms of who is in and who is out. This outcast in a most thorough way is brought to the centre and their giftedness celebrated and multiplied.

So, what of us? Where do we find ourselves in this story?

With Jesus, as he struggles through the layers of need, physical, sexual, intellectual, religious to encounter the 'other' and yield healing and liberation?

With the woman in her place of dispossession and transition?

With the water - set free from its dry cistern and enabled to spring up and flow without cease?

Or with the community of disciples and townspeople, looking on and trying to make sense, and own this fresh understanding for ourselves?

Where for you in this story are the touching points and entry ways that will take you more deeply into the divine, there to be refreshed and nourished by the living water of faith?

Let's take a little time of silence now to reflect and allow the power of this story to move our souls. Amen