

Jesus, trauma therapist

John 4; 16-29

(Complete text John 4; 3-29) (New International Version)

3 So he (Jesus) left Judea and went back once more to Galilee.

4 Now he had to go through Samaria.

5 So he came to a town in Samaria called Sychar, near the plot of ground Jacob had given to his son Joseph.

6 Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired as he was from the journey, sat down by the well. It was about noon.

7 When a Samaritan woman came to draw water, Jesus said to her, 'Will you give me a drink?'

8 (His disciples had gone into the town to buy food.)

9 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.)

10 Jesus answered her, '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.'

11 'Sir' the woman said, 'you have nothing to draw with and the well is deep. Where can you get this living water?'

12 Are you greater than our father Jacob who gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did also his sons and his livestock?'

13 Jesus answered, 'Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst.

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

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

16 He told her, 'Go, call your husband and come back.'

17 'I have no husband,' she replied. Jesus said to her, 'You are right when you say you have no husband.

18 The fact is, you have had five husbands, and man you now have is not your husband. What you have just said is quite true.'

19 'Sir,' the woman said, 'I can see that you are a prophet.

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

21 'Woman,' Jesus replied, 'believe me, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem.

22 You Samaritans worship what you do not know; we worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews.

23 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.

24 God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in the Spirit and in truth.'

25 The woman said, 'I know that Messiah' (called Christ) 'is coming. When he comes, he will explain everything to us.'

26 Then Jesus declared, 'I, the one speaking to you – I am he.'
27 Just then his disciples returned and were surprised to find him talking with a woman. But no one asked, 'What do you want?' or 'Why are you talking with her?'
28 Then, leaving her water jar, the woman went back to the town and said to the people,
29 'Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did. Could this be the Messiah?'

A redeeming encounter with Jesus, pastor and therapist

I am always fascinated by the care and attention Jesus gave to his encounters with very different people.

This episode in particular shows a conversation with a woman who was probably traumatized on many levels. As a doctor, affected by patients with very difficult psychosocial backgrounds, the story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman shows me to what extent he understood her situation and her total lack of perspective.

To start with, Jesus had left the majority of his disciples and had left Judea to go to Galilee. Towards the sixth hour, that is to say at midday, he arrived in Sychar, in Samaria, near Jacob's well. It was almost certainly very hot, and he was hungry and thirsty. His few companions went into the village to buy something to eat.

It was at that precise moment that the Samaritan woman arrived at the well.

I presume that she had deliberately avoided coming to the well at the same time as other women. They would no doubt come later, once the heat was a bit less. The Samaritan woman was wary and kept herself to herself, avoiding contact with others where she could. She was frightened of being again rejected, insulted and looked down on. But we only find out her reasons later on.

I imagine that her encounter with Jesus might have gone something like this:

Once she arrived at the well, the Samaritan woman suddenly spots someone seated in the shade, a man, a Jew. She realises and analyses the situation in a few seconds. This puts her on the defensive and paralyses her emotionally. She can't turn around and leave, she really needs water, and the path leading to the village is too hot in the blazing sunshine. She therefore makes her way towards the well in the hope of filling her pitcher without being noticed and then being able to return home without a hitch.

But then, something astonishing happens: the stranger talks to her and asks her to give him something to drink. She was expecting to be insulted, to hear that he, the Jew had priority, that she had no right to be there or worse, that it was scandalous that a woman should have come there on her own.

But no, he simply wants some water. She is therefore invited to do something that doesn't require her to talk. It is exactly what seems to her the simplest thing in this situation: doing an everyday activity which helps a stranger and being left in peace.

But it is precisely that which arouses her curiosity. She questions Jesus and is interested by his unusual behaviour towards a woman, a Samaritan woman and a pariah. She thus gives him the opportunity to engage in conversation with her.

Jesus replies with a series of enigmas, as he talks to her of God's living water and encourages her to receive living water from him instead of her water.

From what we can tell, he talks slowly, without pressuring her and in a very reassuring manner.

In any case, I would have listened carefully to him

This is exactly what Jesus has achieved. The Samaritan woman realises that an interesting dialogue is possible. She feels she is being taken seriously and senses that Jesus wants to offer her something very special. She also knows the history of Jacob's well.

She is able to and absolutely wants to accept the offer contained in this enigma, receiving from this man the water which wells up to eternal life. She knows and can sense that this moment is unique and that it is going to change her life. With the desire and the decision to try the living water, many of her internal barriers, which she has erected over the years, fall away. She is ready to reveal herself.

What follows is a real cure of the soul. Jesus asks the Samaritan woman to fetch her husband so that they can both benefit from the blessing of his offer. The woman wants to be honest and explains to Jesus that she doesn't have a husband.

Jesus knows her situation. He replies that he knows that her current companion is effectively not her husband, but that she has already had five husbands. This reply opens the floodgates. Henceforth she is willing to say more.

In that brief comment 'You are right when you say you have no husband. The fact is, you have had five husbands, and the man you now have is not your husband,' one can see how clever Jesus is as a therapist.

He doesn't dwell on the fact that she lied to him and doesn't ask her why she didn't tell him straight away but summarizes without judgement and explains that her description of the situation is partially true. The whole truth resides in the five previous relationships with men, which no longer exist. Currently she is living a sixth relationship, which is perhaps only a temporary solution. Her current partner can't therefore be considered as a real husband or as a stable relationship. Jesus starts from the principle that the woman's desire to have living water, to be saved, to have a better life is so great that in the future she will be capable of coping with and tolerating a gentle confrontation with reality conveyed via his intervention.

He senses that she is not going to insult him or run away, but that she wishes to hear his sincere opinion of her situation and of her possible salvation. The Samaritan woman's desire for salvation is so great that going forward she is ready to do anything to attain it.

She understands that contrary to what her community has always told her, salvation is equally possible for her.

With the prospect of salvation, the Samaritan's desire to talk of her past and the wish to overcome both grow to the same extent. The text doesn't tell us a great deal about the young woman's past. It could be many things, all of them difficult stories:

- It is possible that she led a completely normal life for a woman back then, but that she had to cope with the death of her husbands. After the death of her husband, it was the custom to give the woman to his brother or to another relative. At the time of this conversation, she was living as a concubine or servant somewhere. We don't know if this relationship was fulfilling or happy.
- It could be that this woman was very beautiful as a child and that she was 'sold' and given to men while she was still young, and that she was living with her sixth husband.
- Another possibility might be that she had to have an abortion or give her children up for adoption for whatever reason and that this was why she had been made an outcast.

It is certain that none of these possibilities would have been conducive to a life that was happy, free of worry or integrated into society. I imagine that the Samaritan woman was rejected, that she was judged to have been guilty of many things that she wasn't responsible for and that as a consequence society had cast her out.

The fact that Jesus knows all her history and in spite of that listens to her is salutary and brings her hope.

The Samaritan woman concludes that Jesus must be at the very least a prophet.

Thus, in spite of how he is perceived, Jesus makes a second promise which touches and heals the Samaritan woman.

In those days, as a Samaritan, she could only worship God on the neighbouring mountain. She was forbidden from going to the temple in Jerusalem which would have been in her eyes the right place to pray. In addition, she had probably been unable to attend a religious service for many years; she was considered to be impure and her sense of condemnation and shame would have been too great.

I suppose that she lived not only a very isolated life, despised by everyone, but also a life distanced from God, which would have made her doubly desperate.

Jesus promises her that, in the near future, many things are going to improve as far as this is concerned. Certainly, salvation comes only through the Jews, but soon true worshipers in the Spirit will come who know the Father. He promises that salvation will not come just to the Jews, and that Jerusalem will no longer be the only place of worship to enter into contact with his Father and to be in His presence, but all those who live in Spirit and in truth will be able to worship the Father in the Spirit and in truth. For the Samaritan woman, there is the hope of finding a spiritual home. She probably recognises that Jesus is the promised Messiah. She is one of the first people mentioned in the Gospels to whom Jesus is revealed as the Messiah.

So, she returns to the village with two hopes: on the one hand, that of being healed of all her traumatic experiences and of bettering her solitary life, and on the other hand, that of knowing God the Father, of living prayer, and of once again participating in communal religious life.

With that realisation and the question in her heart of knowing that she has encountered the longed-for Messiah, she runs back to her village and tells of her experience.