

(1) A new reality

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[0 : 00] Our lesson is taken from John's Gospel and chapter 4, which is on page 1071 of your Bibles, 1071.

John chapter 4, beginning at verse 1. Now when Jesus learned that the Pharisees had heard that Jesus was making and baptizing more disciples than John, although Jesus himself did not baptize but only his disciples, he left Judea and departed again for Galilee.

And he had to pass through Samaria. So he came to a town of Samaria called Sychar, near the field that Jacob had given to his son Joseph.

Jacob's well was there. So Jesus, wearied as he was from his journey, was sitting beside the well. It was about the sixth hour. There came a woman of Samaria to draw water.

Jesus said to her, give me a drink. For his disciples had gone away into the city to buy food. The Samaritan woman said to him, how is it that you, a Jew, ask for a drink from me, a woman of Samaria?

[1 : 17] For Jews have no dealings with Samaritans. Jesus answered her, if you knew the gift of God and who it is that is saying to you, give me a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water.

The woman said to him, sir, you have nothing to draw water with and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? Are you greater than our father Jacob?

He gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did his sons and his livestock. Jesus said to her, everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again.

But whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again. The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.

The woman said to him, sir, give me this water so that I will not be thirsty or have to come here to draw water. Jesus said to her, go, call your husband and come here.

[2 : 29] The woman answered him, I have no husband. Jesus said to her, you are right in saying I have no husband, for you have had five husbands and the one you now have is not your husband.

What you have said is true. The woman said to him, sir, I perceive that you are a prophet. Our fathers worshipped on this mountain, but you say that in Jerusalem is the place where people ought to worship.

Jesus said to her, woman, believe me, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the father. You worship what you do not know.

We worship what we know for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming and is now here when the true worshippers will worship the father in spirit and truth.

For the father is seeking such people to worship him. God is spirit and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth. The woman said to him, I know that Messiah is coming.

[3 : 42] He who is called Christ. When he comes, he will tell us all things. Jesus said to her, I who speak to you am he.

Let me add my welcome to you. My name is Simon Dowdy and I'm the minister of Grace Church. Let's keep our Bibles open at John chapter 4.

Why don't I pray for us? Heavenly Father, we thank you for that great truth we've been singing about, that you speak to us through your word, the Bible. And we pray, therefore, that this morning, that you would help us to grasp these words of Jesus.

We pray that we would not only hear them, but be transformed by them. And we ask it for Jesus' sake. Amen. Well, this is an interview, isn't it, which beats anything that Michael Parkinson can serve up on a Saturday night.

Here we are. We start off in John chapter 4 with this woman who's had five husbands and is cohabiting with her current lover. Given the conventions of the day, we can be fairly certain that she was out of sorts, not only with herself, but probably most of her friends and neighbours as well.

[4 : 58] We get a sense of that, don't we, in verse 6, where we're told it was about the sixth hour. In other words, it's midday. She's chosen the hottest part of the day to do the heavy work of fetching water, taking it to her house.

No doubt she chooses that time of the day, so she can avoid her neighbours who thoroughly disprove of her domestic arrangements. And she's not really the sort of person you'd ever expect would meet anyone sort of respectable.

She's not the sort of person who'd be invited to a royal garden party this summer. She's not the sort of person who the Prime Minister spin doctors would arrange for him to meet on a walkabout.

But this is the day she meets with Jesus Christ. And we have the opportunity over these next few minutes to eavesdrop on their conversation.

Now the key is verse 10, where Jesus says to her, If you knew the gift of God, and who it is saying to you, give me a drink, you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water.

[6 : 11] If you knew the gift of God, says Jesus. The gift of God is at the very heart of this chapter, God's gift to us. It is about the gift of God. It is about what Jesus Christ offers.

And if you turn to the outline on the reverse side of the song sheet, I'll try to reflect that in the headings on the outline. First of all, Jesus Christ offers eternal life for all.

Now Jesus meeting with this woman is so shocking, because it so obviously breaks all the social conventions of the day. Have a look again at verses 49 with me.

And Jesus came to pass through Samaria. So he came to a town of Samaria called Sychar, near the field that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. Jacob's well was there, so Jesus, weird as he was from his journey, was sitting beside the well.

It is about the sixth hour. There came a woman of Samaria to draw water. Jesus said to her, give me a drink, for his disciples had gone away into the city to buy food.

[7 : 20] The Samaritan woman said to him, how is it that you, a Jew, ask for a drink from me, a woman of Samaria? For Jews have no dealings with Samaritans.

Now could you see how the woman is surprised that Jesus talks to her, because he is flouting two of the deeply embedded social conventions of the day. Firstly, he was ignoring the hatred that kept Jews and Samaritans well apart from each other.

They lived in exclusive communities and had done for centuries, as John puts it in verse 9, for Jews have no dealings with Samaritans. But secondly, Jesus was ignoring the etiquette that in that culture forbade respectable Middle Eastern men from talking to women in public.

Indeed, the rabbis held that it is improper even for a husband to talk to his wife in public. Yet Jesus speaks to her.

People often say, don't they, that the Bible is kind of culture-bound, that it's simply the product of first-century norms. But no, Jesus breaks all of those cultural assumptions and cultural taboos.

[8 : 42] And so, of course, it shouldn't surprise us when the teaching of Jesus and the teaching of the Bible still challenges human cultural assumptions in 2007.

But the heart of Jesus' conversation with this woman really comes in verses 13 to 15. Have a look at them with me. Verse 13. As Jesus says to her, Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again.

But whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again. The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.

The woman said to him, Sir, give me this water so that I will not be thirsty or have to come here to draw water. I wonder if you can see what it is that Jesus offers her.

He's offering her the gift of eternal life. Now we saw just after Easter, when we looked at it, the whole of John chapter 3, the whole of the previous chapter in John's Gospel is about the eternal life that Jesus offers.

[9 : 47] But now in John chapter 4, we see that he makes that offer to anyone, even this woman. You see, Jesus Christ is so compelling because he speaks to all types of people with equal concern and equal respect and his offer of eternal life is for all who will have it.

In other words, Jesus Christ is not bothered by who you are here this morning. He is not bothered by what other people think of you. He is not hampered in his dealings with people by all those discriminations that so often distort the way in which we deal with people.

Perhaps a society has left some of us with a low self-image or perhaps told us we're not worth very much for whatever reason. But Jesus doesn't think like that. In the previous chapter, in John chapter 3, he spoke to a male Jewish aristocrat, Nicodemus.

And in this chapter, he speaks to a female Samaritan peasant. The contrast between the two couldn't be greater, could it? Yet Jesus speaks to them both with equal concern and with equal respect.

And Jesus, as he offers eternal life to this woman, he picks up on an Old Testament passage written hundreds of years earlier that looked forward to the day when people from all nations would be offered forgiveness.

[11 : 24] Why don't we just turn to it, keep a finger, in John chapter 4 and turn back to page 742. Page 742. Sorry, 744.

Isaiah chapter 55. Page 744. And have a look with me at verses 1 and 2 where we see an offer which is totally free.

Come, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters, and he who has no money, come, buy and eat. Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price.

Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread and your labour for that which does not satisfy? Listen diligently to me and eat what is good and delight yourselves in rich food.

And it's a promise looking on to verse 5 to all who will come. Behold, verse 5. You shall call a nation that you do not know and a nation that did not know you shall run to you because of the Lord your God and of the Holy One of Israel for he has glorified you.

[12 : 41] And it's a promise of mercy. It's a promise of free pardon, verse 6. Seek the Lord while he may be found. Call upon him while he is near.

Let the wicked forsake his way and the unrighteous man his thoughts. Let him return to the Lord that he may have compassion on him and to our God for he will abundantly pardon.

You see, what is Jesus Christ saying as he echoes the prophet Isaiah? Well, he is saying that this gift of eternal life he is talking about a free pardon from God to anyone who will come while it lies with him with Jesus Christ alone.

It's a totally free gift and he offers it to this woman. that is the heart of Christianity. It's not about religion. It's why I've called this series if you looked at our sermon card I've called this series No More Religion because Jesus Christ offers us free forgiveness relationship with him and knowing the living God.

it's why Jesus died so that we might be forgiven. And so Jesus offers eternal life to people just like this woman.

[14 : 07] The point being, of course, that if he offers it to her then he offers it to anyone. I was hearing recently about a survey conducted by students at Bradford University on the aspirations of undergraduates across the country and what they aspired to once they had graduated.

And the results of the survey went something like this. You may well think they're fairly predictable but nonetheless they went something like this. Graduate with honours degree get first job buy a car buy a flat get promoted settle down get married get promoted again have first child buy a bigger car buy a house get promoted again have second child buy a second car get promoted buy second home.

And you can imagine how the surveys went on through life like that. Now I take it the advantage that we have over those undergraduates is that we are that little bit older and have probably begun to learn the lesson that however much we acquire in life actually we are never satisfied.

However many houses and cars and all the rest of it. Just like this woman in fact in John 4 as she engages in sort of serial relationships one after another after another always looking for meaning always looking for satisfaction but never finding it.

But you see Jesus offers a totally different kind of life he offers eternal life forgiveness life with God a free gift life just and is as it is meant to be.

[15 : 58] And he offers it to us regardless of who we are. So let me say if we're here today and if we think God would not be interested in us for whatever reason he is interested or perhaps if we think we're too bad for God or perhaps if we thought Christianity is just for kind of respectable upright people then think again because Jesus came to offer eternal life to all who will receive it.

But what I want us to notice is that it is the gift of eternal life that Jesus offers this woman. you see Jesus will not have her settled for what we might call the superstitious religion that she already has.

I wonder if you noticed her superstitious religion as the passage was read to us how back in verse 12 it seems she has some kind of reverence for Jacob one of the patriarchs of the Old Testament how in just a moment in verses 19 and 20 how she will engage with Jesus in religious small talk as long of course as it doesn't get too personal.

Why? She may have considered herself a spiritual person. Yet it is a religion isn't it that has no impact on her life. As Jesus observes in verse 18 she's had five husbands and is currently living with someone else.

In fact she's actually very British isn't she. She says she believes in God. She'll talk about religious things as long as she can kind of keep them at a safe distance as long as it doesn't get too personal.

[17 : 41] But the one thing it mustn't do is to interfere with her life. Religion is fine for her as long as she can continue running her life just the way she wants to.

And I guess we'll know many people like that. It may even describe some of us. So notice then that Jesus wants us to see that that is not what he's about.

He is not in the business of baptising that kind of unbelief. But he said he came to offer eternal life to those who will receive it.

So that's our first point. Jesus offers eternal life for all. Secondly, Jesus offers true worship for all. And Jesus Christ begins to look uncomfortable, doesn't he, when he begins to look uncomfortable company when he switches from talking about water in verses 1 to 15 and now in verses 16 to 18 as he moves on to the subject of the woman's personal lifestyle.

Now it may be that the woman's reply in verse 19 is simply a red herring. As she says, Sir, I perceive that you're a prophet. Our fathers worshipped on this mountain, but you say that in Jerusalem is the place where people ought to worship.

[19 : 01] When your friends are on your back, it's always worth lobbying the question about other religions. It's a useful diversionary tactic. And this is what Jesus does not say by way of reply.

He does not say what our sort of hyper-tolerant pluralist 21st century world would like him to say, which is, well, of course, all religions are true. Any path, if it's right for you, is the right path.

I guess our culture would love Jesus to echo Gandhi's opinion that the soul of all the religions is one, and it's only in kind of outward form that they differ. But Jesus says nothing of the kind, verse 22, you worship what you do not know.

We worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. Can you see how Jesus insists upon the unique religious privilege of the Jewish people in the first century as the historical focus of the way in which God had been working through history up to that point and had revealed himself in history up to that point.

God had revealed himself to the Jewish people in the Old Testament. The temple in Jerusalem was symbolically the place where God dwelt. But Jesus goes on, verse 23, the hour is coming and is now here when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him.

[20 : 34] Can you see what he's saying there? He says to the woman, look, you stand on the threshold of a new era, a new age is dawning. Access to God from now on will no longer be tied to a particular race or to a particular place or building as in the past.

No, from now on, verse 24, worship of the living God will be in spirit and truth. Now, in order to understand what Jesus is saying and what he means by spirit and truth, we need to see it in the context of the rest of John's gospel.

Because Jesus is not talking about the way in which we conduct ourselves in church services, which I think is often the way in which we think, is often what we think Jesus is talking about in verse 24.

Rather, back in John chapter 3, if you were here a couple of months ago when we were looking at that, you'll know that Jesus Christ insists that all of us be born again if we are to get into God's kingdom.

Just click back a page to John chapter 3. And have a look at verse 3 of that chapter. As Jesus says to Nicodemus, truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.

[21 : 49] Nicodemus said to him, how can a man be born when he's old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born? Jesus answered, truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.

You see, when Jesus says that true worshippers must worship in spirit, in chapter 4, he's alluding back to chapter 3 and saying, you must be someone who, in Jesus' terms, is born again.

In other words, we must be those who are believing in Jesus. That's what it means to worship in spirit. What does it mean to worship in truth? Well, truth is an important word in John's gospel.

Why not turn back just, again, another page to chapter 1? Well, I think we see that very clearly. Chapter 1, verse 14.

What are we told? The word, that's Jesus, became flesh and dwelt among us. And, says John, we have seen his glory, glory as of the one, as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.

[23 : 02] And then, verse 18, no one has ever seen God, the only God who is at the Father's side, that's Jesus. He has made him known. Well, John's right, isn't he? No one's ever seen God.

But Jesus has come making God known. He came full of grace and truth. So, what does Jesus mean in chapter 4 when he talks about worshipping in spirit and in truth?

Why, he's believing in him. He's believing in the one who fully reveals God to us. And for Jesus, you see, that is the definition of true worship.

Anything else for Jesus is not worship at all. I spent four years of my life growing up in Malaysia, and if you go to the island of Penang, where we used to go to for our holidays occasionally, one of the big tourist attractions there is a snake temple.

It's a Buddhist temple, and there are poisonous snakes everywhere. They've been drugged, so they just kind of flop around the place, they don't do very much. I actually never went in, because I think I was always working on the assumption there might be one or two that hadn't properly had their drugs for that particular day.

[24 : 18] But I remember often you sort of hear, you see sort of groups of tourists being taken around the snake temple, and the tourist guy talking in awed tones of how local people had come to worship in this temple, had been the centre of worship for hundreds and hundreds of years.

Well, can we see that for Jesus, true worship has nothing to do with religious places, or with perhaps special services designed to make people feel closer to God, either by the liturgy or by the singing, or even by the snakes.

True worship is not about tingly feelings, or a spooky sense of God's presence, whether it's in a religious building, or on a mountaintop. And therefore, I hope we can see that as we look here at Jesus teaching to say that everyone must worship God in their own particular way, which of course is one of the mantras of our culture, well, that must be untrue, wasn't it?

I wonder if you ever heard someone say, well, you know, I like to worship God in this particular manner. Well, it seems so reasonable, doesn't it? But no, we can only worship the living God by believing in Jesus Christ.

And therefore, of course, here is the great assurance for those who are believing in Jesus Christ, that we are living a life of true worship.

[25 : 54] And I think that's what explains the punchline of our passage in verses 25 and 26. Have a look at them with me. The woman said to him, I know that Messiah is coming, he who is called Christ.

When he comes, he will tell us all things. Jesus said to her, I who speak to you, am he. It's a great punchline, but actually, if we want to feel the force of verse 26, what John actually wrote was, I who speak to you, I am.

You may know that hundreds of years earlier in the Old Testament, Moses had stood before God at the burning bush. He had asked God for his name, and God had replied that his name was, I am.

Can we see here in John 4, Jesus is saying, I am that God. I am the living God, the true God. God. It is an extraordinary statement.

And the point is, therefore, that Jesus won't accept anything less than being acknowledged as God. You see, I wonder what we make of Jesus today. It's quite possible we give the kind of answer that this woman gave in verse 19, that he's a prophet, a religious teacher.

[27 : 17] It sounds honourable, doesn't it? But actually, it falls woefully short of recognising who Jesus really is. I wonder if you're someone who, perhaps, like this woman, is gradually coming to realise something about who Jesus is.

Or perhaps you're someone you find that Jesus offends your cultural assumptions. I was brought up thinking that Jesus was simply a nice story for children. Certainly not the kind of thing that any self-respecting teenager as I was when I first came across the claims that Jesus would take seriously.

I then began to realise that historically, Jesus was an important religious leader, that he'd been a real figure of history, that I couldn't simply dismiss the whole thing as myth.

And then as I looked further at the kinds of things that Jesus said, what he did, I saw that actually he could only be God. There weren't any other options but to recognise. That he was indeed God in the flesh.

You see, as we move through John chapter 4, the claims that Jesus makes, they are extraordinary, aren't they? They force us to clarify in our own minds precisely who Jesus is.

[28 : 38] Isn't it extraordinary that he knows all about this woman's fear of adultery? He knows all about her, as he knows all about us. Isn't it extraordinary that he says that he alone offers eternal life?

He alone offers true knowledge of God. Now, who can do that but God alone? Is it not extraordinary that he alone offers true worship?

It's an outrageously egocentric claim to make. In fact, the only person who can make it is God himself. himself. And it's because Jesus is fully God in the flesh that these words of Jesus, these words that he offers to this woman, they're not empty words.

They are words full of truth and full of power. They're words that give us real confidence if we do believe in Jesus and words which profoundly challenge us if we don't.

Well, why don't we pray? Jesus said to her, I who speak to you, I am. Heavenly Father, we praise you very much for Jesus Christ, God in the flesh, come to earth.

[29 : 56] Thank you that he is the one who speaks the truth. And especially we praise you that as we see here, he offers eternal life to all regardless of what we are like, regardless of how we are thought of by others.

and that to know him is to live a life of true worship. We pray, Heavenly Father, these wouldn't simply be words that we hear, but they would transform the way in which we think and live.

And we ask it for Jesus' sake. Amen. Amen.