

There's a strange shift that happens in this conversation between Jesus and the Samaritan woman. One minute, they're talking about living water, the next minute Jesus is telling her to go home and get her husband. It seems to me a bit of a weird trick and I don't know why he does it.

To be clear, for this woman to have had five husbands is not a sign of any fault or sin on her part, but a demonstration that she has experienced great grief. Perhaps all her previous husbands have died, perhaps they have deserted or divorced her. Whatever the situation, we can read between the lines and sense that she has suffered much, probably including poverty, lack of agency, and possibly being excluded and judged by her community. So what is Jesus doing, if he knows all this, saying 'Go, call your husband and come back.' Is it so he can pull out his prophetic parlour trick of knowing things he can't possibly know about her history? Perhaps. Or perhaps he wants to put her in touch with her deepest longings and pain so that she can discover the full healing that comes with Jesus' promised living water?

Or, maybe this story is meant to have another, symbolic layer, where 'husband' means not just a man someone's married to, but commitment and faithfulness to a religious idol.

In this reading, the Samaritan woman is standing in for all those in her region who are deeply and painfully thirsty, because they have repeatedly wedded their hearts to idolatry and dead religion. This story, then, is an invitation to a different betrothal, to the promise of a spiritual marriage with One whose Spirit gushes up from within bringing life, joy, and union with the Source of all.

To unpack that a little, it helps to know that it's a repeating scene in the Bible for a man and a woman to meet at a well and end up betrothed. This is how Isaac, Jacob, and Moses all met their wives. The fact that this well is called 'Jacob's well' is a great big hint to John's readers that we may be about to see another betrothal scene. It also helps to know that the word *ba'al* doesn't just refer to a form of idol worship. It is also the word for 'husband' (and 'owner' and 'lord') in Aramaic, and Hebrew.

Now that we have these things in our minds, that would have been obvious to the first hearers of this story, let's go back to the beginning and see what it's doing at a symbolic, not just literal level. In this story, Jesus is crossing all sorts of boundaries to invite the whole of humanity into a *marriage with their Creator*. He crosses the boundary of gender, by talking to a woman, the boundary of religion and tribe, by talking to a Samaritan, and the boundary of purity, by asking to drink from a vessel carried by someone from that other religion.

He invites the woman to get in touch with her thirst, and asks her to imagine what it would be like to be refreshed continually by "a spring of water gushing up to eternal life". By telling her to go and call her husband, he is checking out whether she is free to receive this water. To put it another way, is she still married to the five gods of her people? This isn't just the offer of a drink from a well, but an invitation to leave behind beliefs and practices that have never really satisfied her thirst, and to be betrothed to the One who stands before her, who is "not yet her husband," but who could be.

Where the dialogue goes next shows that she begins to glimpse this. She asks about the right place to worship – perhaps sensing that if she could get that right, she'd find this inner spring for herself. And Jesus answers her in the same way as he does throughout the gospels – by pointing back to himself as the true Bridegroom who will cause people to worship in spirit and in truth, by drawing them into intimate union, by indwelling them.

People who see sexual or flirtatious overtones in this passage are not far wrong. Jesus is wooing this woman, as an emblem of her people, to see him as the true spouse of her heart's longing. He is expressing God's desire for this woman, and for the Samaritans, who are not beyond the pale, no matter what the Jews may have believed. We, the hearers of the story, are asked to see God as the lover of all people inviting us all into a union that isn't based on who you are, or where you come from, or what kind of temple you worship in.

As those who have been baptised into God's life and love, we in the church are *already* immersed into this marriage union with God. Week by week we participate in the love feast of our union. And yet, so few of us grasp hold of this relationship in the depths of our spirit. We often don't know how to experience in fullness what is already ours through our baptism – which is also a symbol of the gushing, living water that Jesus spoke of. And there is always a temptation to go back to 'former husbands' – old beliefs and practices that look refreshing, but don't do anything for our real thirst.

We still, in the church, tend to look for God's activity outside of ourselves, without reckoning with the God who is a spring inside of us, gushing up to eternal life. We fall into the habit of believing that using good words in liturgy, or living with a high moral code, will satisfy our deep thirst for connection and meaning and hope. But, and I quote from Martin Smith, 'the Spirit is within us, and the place of encounter with our truth is not found on any map – it is within our own hearts.'¹

When God woos us into a deeper experience of the union that is already ours, it is not as a voice or a force external and alien to us, but as a 'something' being enlivened *within* us – often in the places within us that are chaotic, or messy, or raw.

The practice of our religion is therefore about attuning to and responding to our inner life. We do this alone, and we do this in community with others. And not just in clean, holy moments, but in those feelings and situations where we might have to dig a bit to find the clear spring beneath. The invitation to us, as to the woman at the well, is to leave behind religion that doesn't meet our basic thirst as human beings – a thirst for communion, for intimacy, for 'aliveness'. The invitation is to seek instead the joy of union with the God whose divinity gushes up from our inmost core, and brings us to life.

To discover how to practice this union, and to attend to this indwelling, is a lifetime's work, and the true purpose of the rituals that we practice here in church. This Lent, may we become acquainted with the nature of our thirst, and prepare to re-enact the sacred marriage of the Easter feast.

¹ Martin L. Smith, *A Season for the Spirit*, p15