

Come see a man who told me everything I ever did?

In the late 70s there was a singer-songwriter who made a mark for a while called Andrew Gold. One of his albums was entitled 'What's wrong with this picture'. At first glance everything on the vinyl album cover (remember those?) seemed in order - just a room scene with him and his guitars - but as you looked a little closer it just didn't make sense - a bit like the pictures of M.C. Escher the graphic artist who plays with our minds with his impossible constructions and illusions of buildings or never-ending stair cases that don't make any sense if you look at them closely.

Well there are some highly unusual things going on in this account of Jesus and the woman at the well. I wonder if you noticed anything odd? (Actually it may *not* seem terribly odd to us, but to anyone looking on at

the time there are things here that just wouldn't have made sense).

Let's have a look.

Well for a start Jesus had already made a reputation as a holy man - someone leading a movement to bring Israel back to God with all his talk about the kingdom of God. So what on earth is he doing on his own with a woman? Many devout Jewish men wouldn't have allowed themselves to *be* in such a situation. And if they couldn't avoid it for some reason, they certainly wouldn't have taken the initiative to strike up a conversation. It just wasn't done. The risks would have been considered too high: the risk of impurity, of gossip or of being drawn into immorality. ***And yet here is Jesus alone and conversing with a strange woman.*** You'll notice that when the disciples came back later from shopping John tells us they were "astonished."

And then of course the woman is one of those dreaded Samaritans. It's ironic that the organization famous for helping people in extreme distress is named after the people whom first century Jews regarded as the worst kind of outcasts. Why the racial hatred? Well Tom Wright explains in his *John for Everyone* commentary¹ that ever since some of the Jewish exiles had returned from Babylon to find that the central section of their ancient land was occupied by a group who claimed to be the true children of Abraham, there'd been no love lost between them (to put it mildly). There were times when it had broken out into actual bloodshed and murder - but mostly it was simply a matter of not mixing - avoiding each other at all costs. Jews wouldn't have *anything* to do with Samaritans: they certainly wouldn't share eating or drinking vessels with them - very much like the Apartheid regime in South Africa, or the black-

¹ Part 1: Chapters 1-10 (2002:41). London: SPCK

white divide in the southern states of the USA before the release of Nelson Mandela and the American Civil Rights movement. ***And yet Jesus asks this Samaritan woman for a drink*** (Are you getting how outrageous this is?)

On top of all that, this woman is clearly of quite questionable character. How would Jesus have known that? Well the normal time for women to visit Jacob's Well (and apparently it's still there) - situated a little distance from the town - would be at a cooler time of the day - maybe first thing in the morning or late in the afternoon. This woman comes during the heat of the day ("mad dogs and Englishmen go out in the midday sun"). Why? - because she's knows she's not likely to meet anyone - especially those who would have been aware of her shady past and current lifestyle (and Jesus presently shows her he's well aware of all that

stuff too). *And yet here he is, engaging her in conversation* - a conversation with a playful, double-meaning, teasing tone to it.

These different levels of meaning are typical of John's reporting of Jesus' conversations with people.

Remember it was Nicodemus last week who took Jesus literally when he was talking in metaphors about being born from above.

Well thus time Jesus tells the Samaritan woman about 'living water'. Of course he's not referring to ordinary H₂O, corporation hair oil, Adam's ale - he's referring to the new life he's offering to anyone and everyone - no matter what race they belong to, where they're from, or indeed how bad they've been.

Just look at what he says about this new living water.

Not only will you never be thirsty again, it'll become like

a spring bubbling up inside you - refreshing you with the new life which is coming into the world with Jesus - the whole new state of affairs God is bringing about by his Spirit (& John gets to explain this a bit later in his gospel).

What's the woman's reaction?

- (well like Nicodemus) she hasn't a clue what Jesus is saying
- but there's clearly something going on inside her because she wants to know more - and I wonder if that's our state of mind sometimes - *intrigued*, wanting to know more.

But she's in for real shock - like everyone who starts to take Jesus seriously. Yep - he has living water/new life to offer all right - but when you start to drink it, it's going to change every area of your life. Because if we

want to take Jesus up on his offer of living water, then we're going to have to get rid of the stale, foetid, mouldy, stagnant stuff we've been trying to live off all this time.

In the Samaritan woman's case the smelly, unhealthy, impure stuff to do with her relationships.

Jesus saw (and sees) straight to the heart of what's really going on for every one of us - and the woman's reaction to what Jesus tells her is a classic example of what every pastor or counsellor or even good friend knows only too well. Put your finger on the sore spot and people immediately begin diverting the conversation by talking about something else - especially (when it comes to talking to vicars) throwing out some obscure religious question. I'm sure you've heard things like this too: 'Well we used to go to church, but then my aunt said we

should go with her - and then I didn't like the minister's wife ...and now we've stopped going altogether.'

For the Samaritan woman, being good at flirtatious repartee, she's trying to keep Jesus at a distance and keep the talk between them at a jokey, superficial level.

Of course like the kinds of conversations I've mentioned that are part of parish life, they're all diversions if we're absolutely honest - and as far as they blame what goes on in churches, they're all pretty irrelevant, because as we've been learning together, both as a parish and a ministry area - the kingdom of God and the institutional church are definitely not the same thing.

But going back to what's wrong with this picture - although we see lots of people being profoundly affected by her testimony of her encounter with an all-

knowing Jesus, we're not told whether she actually came to Christ herself. We know John is a cracking storyteller and he leaves it tantalisingly open for us to decide. Why is that? Well Jane Williams thinks that both the woman at the well - and indeed the Israelites in their history with Yahweh are very often unwilling to believe what's right there in front of them. Lots of the stories about Moses leading the children of Israel in the desert are all about their dithering. The very simplicity of the appeal to trust God and his goodness seems to always present us with enormous problems.

Thankfully, as the Apostle Paul points out, God's mercy - his patient, gracious, loving kindness and goodness - is all around us - long before we even bother to take a look. Jane Williams goes on to say *"the hard part is not that we have to deserve it, because we don't. The hard part is that we just have to accept it...Did (this woman)*

allow the generous waves of God's grace to overwhelm her, or did she sit down in the desert and moan about being thirsty?"

God's claim on every human life is absolute and can't be evaded by questions about which church people think they should go to, or whether they like the vicar or not, any more than Jesus' claim on this woman's moral conscience could be avoided by the debate, going on for hundreds of years already, as to whether Mount Zion in Jerusalem, or Mount Gerazim in Samaria was the true holy mountain.

In fact, from now on, if Jesus' mission is really about bringing heaven to earth, churches and holy mountains aren't going to matter a whole lot. At best they're signposts to the real thing - and certainly not ends in themselves - and if they become substitutes for it - well we're really in trouble (aren't we?). No time for

spiritual things while we've been keeping church going?
No room for praying? Then what are we about? John is again telling us to look to Jesus - to listen to him - to let him bring us new life - living water - a new reign and rule in our lives that frees us from the heavy weights we insist on carrying around when we rely on our own ingenuity and resources.