

The Well is Deep: Notes for leaders

These notes have been written by Clare Amos, USPG's Theological Consultant and Director of Theological Studies for the Anglican Communion Office. They provide an introduction and commentary on the whole biblical passage that is being studied during this five-week Lent course.

The account of Jesus' encounter with the woman at the well of Samaria (John 4:5-42) offers perhaps the most extensive account in any of the Gospels of 'mission in action'. It is also the longest conversation that Jesus had with anyone in any of the Gospels. Through our exploration of it we can begin to respond to many of the questions that engagement with God's mission poses to us and to the Church today. So when USPG decided that our 2010 Lent course would focus on 'What is mission?', it was to this powerful biblical narrative that we decided to turn. Unlike our normal practice in previous years when we selected a different biblical passage for each week – this year we have chosen to focus on this one powerful biblical story, revisiting it each week of the course, and quarrying it each time with a different question linked to mission. The five questions are:

Week 1: What is mission? 4:26

Week 2: Where does mission happen? 4:5

Week 3: Who does mission? 4:39

Week 4: Why do we do mission? 4:9

Week 5: How do we do mission? 4:42

Although a particular verse of the passage is 'highlighted' for each of these questions, in reality each week you will be needing to explore the passage in its totality (and sometimes in its wider context within the Gospel of John). The highlighted verse for the week is intended to act as a peg and a starting point for wider discussion, both of the mission relate issue and the story of this intriguing encounter between Jesus and this unnamed woman. As we will indeed discover during the weeks of Lent, 'the well is deep'.

These leader's notes offer first of all a detailed reflection on the passage as a whole – and also seek to open up some understanding of mission in other parts of the Gospel of John as well. The reflection is offered in the form of a commentary, with a particular focus on mission issues raised by the text, and it takes its order from the biblical narrative (rather than the order of the weekly highlighted verses). After this commentary, there are some brief suggestions linked to specific weeks of the course.

The version of the biblical text used for this reflection is the NRSV. The biblical text is set in italics.

Commentary

⁴ *But he [Jesus] had to go through Samaria.*

When the story of Jesus' encounter with the woman of Samaria is read in churches, set in lectionaries etc, it normally begins with verse 5. However verse 4 offers us a key that helps to unlock the passage. Why was it that Jesus 'had to go through Samaria'. At one level the answer is straightforwardly geographical – the obvious route in a straight line from Jerusalem, where he had previously been, to Galilee – the region for which he was headed, would take him through Samaria. It is true, of course, that some Jews chose not to take this route – either because of fear, or due to piety and unwillingness to be contaminated by travelling through 'unclean' territory. They preferred to take a detour, crossing the Jordan and then turning to make their way north. So Jesus' choice of this route was not without significance.

But John's Gospel notoriously operates on several layers and it is likely that we are intended to read a deeper meaning into this 'had to'. In Luke 13.33 Jesus tells us that we must travel to Jerusalem – for it is there alone that prophets are killed. There is a similar sort of divine 'mustness' about this verse in John. But here the 'mustness' does not link to his death (at least not directly) but rather to the fact that the divine mission he is carrying out requires him to bridge boundaries and barriers. And nowhere, from a Jewish perspective, were these barriers more evident than in Samaria. So this brief introduction to the passage already tells us something

about the nature of mission – that it must bridge and transform barriers. There would be a later mission of the church to Samaria (see below) and that too would open up new gateways.

⁵*So he came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. ⁶Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon.*

The traditional location for this encounter, commemorated today by a church, is in a suburb of modern day Nablus, a city on the West Bank. The Old Testament city of Shechem (important in the stories about Jacob) is nearby, and it has been suggested that Sychar is a typographical mistake for 'Sychem' ie Shechem (some manuscripts of John's Gospel read Sychem at this point.) The area was in the heartland of Samaritan territory and is overshadowed by Mount Gerizim – which the Samaritans regarded as the holy mountain.

Notes of time in John's Gospel normally have a particular significance. The comment that 'it was about noon' – the hottest time of the day – and certainly in the summer (see 4.35) not the normal time for collecting water – has both practical and theological implications. It sets the scene for Jesus' encounter in the next verse with the woman – what kind of person is she that she has to fetch her water at this time? However it also encourages us to cast our minds forward – for towards the end of the Gospel it will be at noon that Jesus will hang on the cross. As we shall see – the experience of Jesus and the woman here – and Jesus' own later experience are interconnected.

It is noteworthy that Jesus' human fatigue and weakness – tired from the journey and thirsty – are mentioned so clearly. Indeed it is perhaps his very vulnerability that allows the encounter to take place.

⁷*A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, 'Give me a drink'. ⁸(His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.) ⁹The Samaritan woman said to him, 'How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?' (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.)*

Here we reach the nub of the story – the relationship between Jews and Samaritans. Breaking down barriers lies at the very heart of this Gospel story. The hostility and social apartheid between Jews and Samaritans was a well-known feature of life in first century Palestine. In terms of the essentials of faith there was comparatively little that separated the two groups even though both purveyed an inaccurate picture of the history of the other. Their main point of argument in New Testament times lay over where the Temple should be located – was it Jerusalem (Judaism) or was it Mount Gerizim (the Samaritans, see John 4.20)? But this difference was enough to lead to a rigorous separation between the two communities. Each considered the other defiled and impure. They certainly would not share food, drink or eating utensils. (John 4.9) which was the reason for the woman's surprise at Jesus' initial request to her. What is more the apparently irregular marital situation of the woman (John 4.17-18) and her need to draw water at the hottest point of the day when other women were not around were both pointers to the fact that even within her Samaritan society the woman would have been regarded as 'unclean'.

But Jesus refuses to be bound by the protocols of division, and uses his and her common need – for water – to lead the woman and himself forward in mutual liberation. In fact he takes the initial step along this path by asking to receive water from this 'unclean' woman. 'He receives from her the water his thirsty body needs. To receive from someone in such cultures is to show respect to the giver.' (*Andrew Wingate, 'Free to Be'*).

One of the oppressive features of life for many Christians in South Asia is the ongoing prevalence of the caste system. The majority of Christians are Dalits ('outcastes') or members of one of the lowest castes. In such context the notion of sharing drinking vessels with others (of different or higher castes) would be unthinkable – and the request for a glass of water from another, whether they be of higher or lower caste would be turned down. Christians in such contexts with the way that Jesus' willingness to ask, and the woman's willingness to respond, both from a position of vulnerability, enables traditional barriers to be breached. It is the heart of what mission can mean. Mukti Barton, a Christian writing about this story from the perspective of Bangladesh, notes,

'There is no dichotomy between the giver and the receiver or between heaven and earth. Everything is interrelated. The liberation of the woman at the well eventually frees both Jesus and

the woman together. On the spiritual level Jesus is thirsty as long as the Samaritan woman is. His own thirst for righteousness is quenched by valuing the Samaritan woman. Jesus in the story is in total solidarity with the woman.'

Sister Vandana, a Christian scholar from India, in her studies on St John's Gospel *Waters of Fire* also notes the 'caste' issues in the story, which make it such a powerful statement of the Gospel for many Indian Christians.

¹⁰Jesus 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.'¹¹The woman said to him, 'Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water?'¹²Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?'¹³Jesus said to her, 'Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again,¹⁴ but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.'¹⁵The woman said to him, 'Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water.'

Among other reasons that this story is so cherished by many Christians in Asia and Africa (see notes and suggestions below) is that it resonates with their daily experience of life in which the drawing of water is a daily and burdensome chore. Although the dialogue between Jesus and the woman will touch on deep theological matters before it is through, it begins with a discussion that is basic and essential to all human life. At the very heart of the story is the overlap between physical and spiritual 'living water'. In semitic languages such as Hebrew the normal expression for 'running water' (ie fresh water than comes from a spring rather than still, and possible contaminated, water from a well) is *mayim haim* which literally means 'living water', and this linguistic pun lies the heart of the story. The liberation that Jesus offers in the course of this story is especially precious. By its very nature – linked to the everyday but essential needs of all human beings, this story is one that helps us bridge the boundaries erected by faith and culture. As with this narrative, mission, if it is to be real and authentic, needs to begin from people's real needs.

¹⁶Jesus said to her, 'Go, call your husband, and come back.'¹⁷The woman answered him, 'I have no husband.' Jesus said to her, 'You are right in saying, "I have no husband";¹⁸ for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!'¹⁹The woman said to him, 'Sir, I see that you are a prophet.²⁰ Our ancestors worshipped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem.'

At this point in the story we are beginning to get to the different religious beliefs that separated Jews and Samaritans. 'This mountain' (verse 19) is Mount Gerizim – referenced in the Old Testament scriptures (the first five books of which were shared between Jews and Samaritans) – and venerated by the Samaritans as their holy place par excellence for the previous 300 years or so. It is clear that the split between Jews and Samaritans happened quite late in Old Testament history – well into the post-exilic period, although both sides developed fictional accounts that placed it considerably earlier. (The Jews believed that the Samaritans were the descendants of the Israelites referred to in 2 Kings 17 who had been left in Samaria/Israel after many of their fellow countrymen were deported to Assyria. In turn those who had been left behind had intermarried with Assyrian colonists. However careful study of the history and of Samaritan sources suggests that the split from Judaism occurred several centuries later.) Such fictional accounts were part of the polemic between the two groups. The Samaritans looked forward to the coming of a prophetic Messiah, basing their expectation on Deuteronomy 18.15 which speaks of the appearance of 'a prophet like Moses', and the woman seems to be alluding to this as she begins to wonder if Jesus is 'a prophet'. It is an interesting development in their conversation. Clearly for Christians today – and for the author of John's Gospel – Jesus is much more than simply 'a prophet'. Yet Jesus does not correct her – and his willingness to accept faith wherever it is found and however partial it may be is a pattern that those with a heart for mission need to emulate.

The woman's family situation comes to the fore at this point. She has been much-married. Some commentators have seen the reference to the five husbands to be a symbolic allusion to the five peoples referred to in 2 Kings 17.30-31 that came to Israel/Samaria during the Assyrian times – intermarrying with the indigenous population and bringing their own gods with them. This fits with

the way that the prophet Hosea (for example) used the metaphor of adultery when talking about Israel's apostasy and worship of idols. In other words the woman is herself somehow symbolically representing the people of Samaria who had been disloyal to God.

However (although it is often understood in such a way) it is not necessarily correct to assume that the woman has had a series of adulterous relationships, nor necessarily that she had been through multiple divorces. I remember listening to a Nigerian friend preaching on the passage some years ago. Speaking out of the African context his understanding of the woman was that each husband had died in turn (rather as described in Mark 12.18-27) and so she had finally been regarded as 'unlucky' and no other man would marry her!

Whatever the precise reason for the woman's situation it seems to have led in some way to her alienation from the rest of her society (hence the collection of water at noon). It is also important to 'read' her encounter with Jesus in the light of a narrative pattern that occurs several times in the Old Testament. An alien stranger comes thirsty to a well. A woman draws water for him to drink. The stranger meets the woman's kinsfolk and then makes her his bride. The pattern occurs (with slight variations) with Isaac's servant and Rebecca, Jacob and Rachel, and Moses and Zipporah. The pattern leads us to expect therefore that somehow Jesus and the woman will be betrothed to each other. Which in one sense they are – but Jesus has wooed and won the woman as a disciple for mission, rather than as a sexual partner.

²¹Jesus said to her, 'Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. ²²You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews.

²³But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. ²⁴God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth. ²⁵The woman said to him, 'I know that Messiah is coming' (who is called Christ). 'When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us.' ²⁶Jesus said to her, 'I am he, the one who is speaking to you.'

Jesus speaks of his 'hour' – a word that will re-echo like a tolling bell several times in John's Gospel and will eventually arrive at the point of his crucifixion (John 13.1). At that hour both the Temple in Jerusalem and Mount Gerizim will find themselves declared redundant. The crucifixion of Christ stands as a judgement upon all religious systems that are held captive by holy places, and upon the 'spirit' that leads them to become the source of division and hatred between human beings. Such a message was profoundly relevant to the Holy Land of New Testament times: it is also a message that is very relevant to the Holy Land today. Jesus promises instead that true worshippers will worship 'in spirit and in truth' – though he nowhere spells out exactly what that means.

Yet perhaps in slight contradiction to this insight which seems to offer a challenge to traditional religion which normally exists with the accoutrements of holy places, hierarchy and sacred scripture, suggesting that 'true worshippers' need to move beyond these, Jesus then goes on to reaffirm the importance of particularity, 'salvation is from the Jews'. It seems to me that this statement in verse 22 exists in a sort of tension with Jesus' words in verses 21 and 23. Yet it is perhaps a necessary tension. As someone who is engaged for a significant part of my professional life with inter faith concerns – I sometimes find myself living with the same kind of tension. I want to express the glorious particularity of my own faith, in my case the Christian faith, and its life-giving nature for me, yet at the same time I want to move beyond the tensions and divisions that 'religions' can sometimes contribute to in our world.

The Father and the Spirit plays an important role in this story – both explicitly as here in verses 21-24 and implicitly or symbolically – for the symbolic use of 'water' throughout the story clearly closely links to the link between spirit and baptism. Recent insight into the nature of mission has led missiologists to stress the key role of the Spirit in mission. Such thinking opens up the possibilities of wider engagement with other faiths that perhaps are not possible if we think primarily in Christological terms. For example the invitation of the Pope to the leaders of other religions to pray with him at Assisi in 1986 implicitly recognised the action of the Spirit in other religions, especially in prayer.

One insight however that must not be missed is the fact that in 4.26 we have the first occasion that Jesus says 'I am' of himself in the Gospel of John. This insight in verse 26 is picked

up in the first week of the course. I have spoken in various places on this topic – and perhaps the best way of sharing what seems to me to be its importance is to copy in what I said at the Partnership for World Mission Conference a couple of years ago. I apologise that this means I will repeat at one or two points things I have already said above, but they are worth repeating to enable us to see how they fit in with this central theme of ‘I am’:

“‘I am, the one who is speaking with you’. That is the first time that Jesus says ‘I am’ in the Gospel of John. I find it an exhilarating and powerful discovery to realise that the first time that Jesus discloses this divine identity it should be to a person who is a woman, a Samaritan, who was not a member of his own religious community, and someone who was apparently ostracised among her own people. What is this telling us about the nature of God? The disclosure comes at the end of a quite lengthy talk between Jesus and the woman, in which they have discussed theology almost as equals. In the course of their meeting, each have ministered to the other, new life has been offered, barriers have been broken and the vision of a new and deeper relationship between God and human beings, and between human beings themselves has been opened up. And then Jesus says ‘I am’.

Let me take you back again to the Old Testament for a moment: to that very point where God discloses his name to Moses. It comes during the encounter between God and Moses at the burning bush, as God is seeking to persuade Moses to return to Egypt to liberate his people from bondage. Moses is more than unwilling – and thinks up excuses not to have to go. As part of his wrangling with God he points out that if he is going to tell the people that ‘the God of your ancestors had sent me to you’ then the people will respond in turn ‘And what is the name of this God’. It is at this moment that God reveals his name. And in doing so he takes an immense risk – for in the religious world of the Old Testament to let your name be known made you vulnerable – it allowed people to control you, to bend you to their will. If that was true for human beings – how much more so for a god. The sweep of the Old Testament makes it clear that God was very hesitant to disclose his name – for precisely such reasons; but now there is no choice; compassion for his people dictates that God must, or else his people would remain for ever slaves in Egypt. And so God makes himself vulnerable and allows his name to be known. And yet that enigmatic phrase ‘I am who I am’ seems deliberately designed to preserve God’s sovereign freedom; not to allow human beings to manipulate him as their puppet. The very mystery of the phrase suggests that God’s name is ultimately beyond human control and comprehension. It is a name which is a different sort of name. There is a German theologian called Walther Zimmerli who argues that this name that is no name is the thread that lies at the very heart of the Old Testament and draws it together: as Zimmerli puts it ‘The God who is invoked by the name ‘Yahweh’ repeatedly demonstrates his freedom by dashing to pieces all the ‘images’ in which humanity would confine him. There are many ways that human beings can seek to confine God – we can build him a temple and tell him to live in it, to be available as required; we can seek to insist that he becomes the mere guarantor of an inflexible moral order in which the wicked are always punished and the good are always prosperous. The people of the Old Testament tried all these – and more besides – and the story of the Old Testament tells again and again how God who is the I am who I am, refused to be trapped and held captive by all such neat religious systems and theologies.

It is this I want to remember as we return to John’s Gospel and Jesus’ first disclosure of ‘I am’. It is I think no accident that it is embedded in a passage which speaks so extensively about the barriers that existed between Jews and Samaritans. At the time of Jesus the primary quarrel between the two communities was focused on the two temples that were the focal buildings of each faith. As the woman said to Jesus, ‘Our ancestors worshipped on this mountain – Gerizim – which rises high in the heart of Samaritan territory – while you, the Jews, say that it is in the temple in Jerusalem that people need to worship God.’. So two holy places originally erected to venerate God had become focal points for hostility and division as both communities sought to possess God each on its own terms. It had become, if you like, the antithesis of allowing God the freedom to be God, to be Yahweh ‘the I am who I am’. It is into the middle of this bitter strife that Jesus reveals himself as ‘I am’, the very revelation of this name perhaps acting as judgement upon religious communities which sought to domesticate God, to claim that they and they alone had the whole truth, and who by their exclusion of others sought to limit God’s freedom to act how, where and when he wishes. It is also no coincidence that the physical symbol that runs through the dialogue between Jesus and the woman is ‘living water’. In semitic languages, such as Hebrew, the normal expression for ‘running water’ - fresh water than comes from a spring rather than still, and possible

contaminated, water from a well - is *mayim haim* which literally means 'living water'. The Gospel writer is deliberately punning on the dual possibilities of the expression. So when in verse 10 Jesus offers the woman 'living water', understandably her first thought is of such fresh gushing spring water. But the quality of such water – just as the quality of the 'I am', is that it runs free, it is not under the control of human power. Like the Spirit of God 'living water' will run and blow where it – rather than we – wills.

And yet by God's grace human beings are a central part of this story. Jesus' first words to the woman are 'Give me a drink', expressing his thirst, his need, and asking this apparently unclean woman to meet it. For many Christians in Asia, especially in India, who come from disadvantaged groups and classes and are often treated as unclean in their societies, this encounter expresses the very heart of the Christian Gospel. Significantly it is one of the most depicted gospel stories in Asian Christian art; To be willing to receive water from another in such a culture is to show respect to the giver - to break down the barriers between the clean and unclean. So Jesus' engagement with the woman breaks the societal protocols of division and leads to a mutual liberation both for the woman and for himself; his thirst for righteousness is quenched by his valuing of the woman.

Jean Vanier puts it like this: 'I am' begs for water from one of the most despised and broken women, who is no one, with no name, who is nothing in the eyes of society. Jesus reveals to her who she is and who she will become – a source of the waters of life of God – if she opens up her heart to him and receives his love. Misery and mercy meet in love.'

I do not think there is a better visual expression of this truth than the statue called the 'Water of Life' which is found in the grounds of Chester Cathedral (reference for this given below). It offers a profound depiction of the sense of mutuality and interdependence at the heart of the story. Who is ministering to whom? Surely we cannot separate out the giving and receiving – both are dependent each on the other. What a gospel we are being offered!

Each time I look at the picture it takes me deeper into this mystery. I invite you to ponder it for a few minutes while I mention something else. One of the reasons I enjoy talking to groups of people about the Bible is that often I discover fresh insights from those I am meeting with. So it was a few weeks ago, when I was reflecting on John 4 with a group in Hereford. I had made the comment that I have also made today – about the difference in John's Gospel between the 'I am' sayings with a predicate such as 'I am the bread of life' – and these other - what I call the hidden 'I am' sayings. Then somebody pointed out that one way of translating John 4.26 could suggest that it too includes a predicate 'I am the one talking with you'. And they are quite right. So just as Jesus is elsewhere describing God as the bread of life or the light of the world and identifying himself with those realities, so here he is describing God as 'the one talking with you' – and identifying himself with that expression of divinity. It is a powerful insight, which I am still pondering but it seems to suggest to me that the Gospel is saying that at the very heart of what it means to be God, as Jesus reveals it to us, is God's communication with humanity. It is of the very nature of God to be a God who communicates with his human creation. And this, I remind you, is the very first 'I am' of John's Gospel, so John is saying that this is the fundamental nature of God – upon which all the other things John wants to tell us about God in his Gospel will be based. It does of course link with the way that this Gospel opens with that profound meditation on the Word, the Logos. It is also a significant thought to reflect on here at this conference with its focus on mission: that God's identity is so profoundly linked to his ongoing communication with his human creation. It is an insight that is surely difficult to grasp in its totality – but perhaps that is typical of the unpinnable-downness of the 'I am who I am'."

²⁷ Just then his disciples came. They were astonished that he was speaking with a woman, but no one said, 'What do you want?' or, 'Why are you speaking with her?' ²⁸ Then the woman left her water-jar and went back to the city. She said to the people, ²⁹ 'Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?'

The disciples almost have a comic role in this story – apparently uneasy with the impropriety of Jesus talking with this dubious woman. It reinforces the hint of sexuality about the story that the meeting of a man and a woman at the well had set up. What does the woman leaving her water-jar suggest? Perhaps that now she has discovered the 'living water' she will not be thirsty again. It is interesting that the same word is used here for the

woman's water jar as appeared in 2.6 for the water-jars whose contents were turned into wine by Jesus at the marriage feast. Like them the woman's water jar represents old ways that are no longer necessary.

The question the woman asks in verse 29, 'Can this be the Messiah?', is tentative. In Greek grammatical structure it is framed in such a way as to half expect the answer 'No'. Yet it is part of the woman's journey to faith and participation in mission. It is a reminder that God can work with and use people's half-formed faith for God's purposes – even when to our eyes it may feel inadequate.

³⁰They left the city and were on their way to him. ³¹Meanwhile the disciples were urging him, 'Rabbi, eat something.' ³²But he said to them, 'I have food to eat that you do not know about.' ³³So the disciples said to one another, 'Surely no one has brought him something to eat?' ³⁴Jesus said to them, 'My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work. ³⁵Do you not say, "Four months more, then comes the harvest"? But I tell you, look around you, and see how the fields are ripe for harvesting. ³⁶The reaper is already receiving wages and is gathering fruit for eternal life, so that sower and reaper may rejoice together. ³⁷For here the saying holds true, "One sows and another reaps." ³⁸I sent you to reap that for which you did not labour. Others have laboured, and you have entered into their labour.'

These are verses which prompt a certain amount of 'reading between the lines'. Many commentators and readers suggest that they were written in the knowledge of a mission to Samaria in the days of the early Church (after Jesus' death and resurrection). Such a mission may in fact be described in Acts 8.4-25 when first Philip preaches the gospel in Samaria, and then the faith of Philip's converts is confirmed by the apostles (Peter and John) going to Samaria to lay their hands on these converts. So it is a two-stage process. A similar two-stage process seems to be implied in our text in John, 'Others have laboured but you have entered into their labour.' It can of course only be speculation, but it is sometimes suggested that there was a certain amount of tension about the early church's mission to Samaria and that that is being reflected here. Perhaps the group that initiated the mission was not considered quite 'orthodox' enough, and so the mission was felt to need later apostolic confirmation. That may be the picture we get from Acts, which is a book in which, on the whole, the apostles are kept at the centre of things. John's Gospel however seems to be more sympathetic to less hierarchical and official manifestations of the church's life – and the comments in this section seem to suggest that the gospel writer is encouraging the official apostles to remember and honour the work of others too. Indeed there is quite a wide-spread view e.g. *Oscar Cullmann: The Johannine Circle* that the writer of John's Gospel may themselves have had specific links to groups such as Samaritan Christians.

For our purposes the verses act as a salutary reminder that God's mission doesn't depend simply on one group or individual – not even us! Rather co-operation and collaboration among people with different backgrounds, strengths, and gifts to offer is a proper expression of the mission of God.

³⁹Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman's testimony, 'He told me everything I have ever done.' ⁴⁰So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them; and he stayed there for two days. ⁴¹And many more believed because of his word. ⁴²They said to the woman, 'It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Saviour of the world.'

It is possible to read these verses as a slight slap in the face for the woman – who, after being the agent of bringing the gospel to her people, is now being put back in her cage (perhaps because she is a woman!). Similar episodes would not be totally unknown in the history of Christian missions – where on occasion women were accepted as leaders until a group or church became established – and then discovered themselves displaced for some reason or other. However perhaps the key thing to note is that now the inhabitants of this Samaritan city have made what was originally the woman's faith their very own. It is when people feel enabled to speak out of their own experience, and not simply 'borrow' at second hand the faith of those who have brought them the message, that the gospel can really become rooted in the life and ongoing story of a community. The title 'Saviour of the World' is not found elsewhere in John's Gospel – though it is

language that is known to Luke e.g. Luke 2.11. But the word 'salvation' occurs several times in a short passage (Isaiah 12.1-6) which speaks 'With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation'. It is tempting to suggest that the gospel writer may have had this passage in mind as he explored the story of this woman and her Samaritan co-citizens. In the Bible 'salvation' has several dimensions, spiritual, physical, emotional, even political. Sometimes in fact the word 'salvation' in the Bible is better translated into English as 'healing'. So when John concludes this narrative by describing Jesus in such terms, he is reminding us that 'holistic mission' (to which USPG is committed) rightly takes account of the varied needs of people, seeking to offer health to both body and soul, both of individuals and the wider community.

Suggestions for activities and further reading

1. This is one of the most vivid narratives in the entire New Testament, and therefore it invites people to enter into and explore it, using their own imagination and experience.

Why not invite people to 'identify' themselves with one of the actors or groups in the story? Taking on the persona of that actor/group and 'seeing' the story through their own eyes. The various actors are the woman, the disciples, the woman's Samaritan co-citizens, (perhaps) the inhabitants of Jerusalem where Jesus has come from, and perhaps even (if done with care) Jesus himself. Either you could explore it through a set of different 'eyes' each week – or on one week you could have different people representing different groups, and holding a discussion between them. Questions that might be explored include 'What is Jesus offering you?' 'What is your feeling about this offer?' 'How are you going to respond and why?' 'What do you think is God's mission and do you feel able to share in it?'

Note: The reflection 'The woman's tale – which forms one of the resources on this website, which I wrote a number of years ago, retells the story, and sets it in the wider context of the ministry of Jesus, from the perspective of the woman. However you may wish to ask people to explore the story imaginatively for themselves before sharing what is of course another person's imagination.

Incidentally if you want to include the inhabitants of Jerusalem among your imaginative presentations, you might be interested to know that a number of biblical scholars point out that Jesus' dialogue with the woman of Samaria and his dialogue with Nicodemus in Jerusalem in the previous chapter are deliberately arranged so that they provide points of comparison and contrast.

2. As already implied in the commentary above – this is one of the most frequently illustrated gospel stories – particularly by Asian and African artists – because it speaks so powerfully to the experience of many.

So during one session you may wish to explore a selection of art depicting the story that is available on the web. A good place to start looking is at Bible Art

http://www.biblical-art.com/biblicalsubject.asp?id_biblicalsubject=627&pagenum=1

Also the website Textweek (which also offers an interesting selection of commentary resources) notes selection of relevant pictures at:

http://www.textweek.com/art/samaritan_woman.htm

The picture of the 'Water of Life' at Chester cathedral can be viewed at

<http://static.panoramio.com/photos/original/8207955.jpg>

A picture of Jesus meeting the woman at the well is found as part of the icon 'Christ is our Reconciliation' (bottom left corner) which is itself available at:

<http://www.paxchristi.net/international/eng/showsymbols.php?wat=showsym1>

It would be well worth using the icon as a resource, particularly for Week Four.

3. An interesting article that is worth being aware of and is available on the internet is:

Jesus in Samaria: A model for cross-cultural ministry; Biblical Theology Bulletin, Fall, 2005 by Eric John Wyckoff:

http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0LAL/is_3_35/ai_n15674958/