

**John 4:5-26 – Sermon for Sunday 12 March 2023**  
**(Rev Phil Wootton)**

The Welsh Comedian, Rhod Gilbert, said, *"In the Bible, God made it rain for forty days and forty nights; and that was still the best summer we had!"* Don't we love talking about the weather? It's something that's typically British – part of our identity. It defines us as a nation. However, it might surprise us, and Rhod Gilbert, to learn that the average rainfall in the lands of the Bible is no less than in southern England (although I can't answer for Wales).

In the Holy Land, the rain comes all in one go, within 3 or 4 months, and then the weather's hot and dry the rest of the time. As a result, water storage is vital. Historically, you did that by digging underground to create water cisterns out of the rock; or you dig deeper – deep, deep wells – in order to reach the water table, however far down you have to go. Jacob's Well was one of these, going down perhaps 40m to reach an underground stream. Just as muttering about the rain is part of who we British are, life by the well – filling your water jars in the morning, and watering your animals in the evening – was part of the identity of the people of the land. Since drawing water from a well takes time, it's natural to start talking, sharing news and telling stories. Such was the case with Jacob's well in Sychar near Shechem (modern-day Nablus, on the West Bank), at the heart of Samaria.

Our story in John 4 is not in the cool of the day, but under the baking midday sun. Jesus, a stranger to the area, sits there by the well alone. He is tired, hot, thirsty. He longs for those cool refreshing waters, but he still has time to think of the deeper meaning, the deep thirst in so many people's lives. Anyway, he has no bucket, no rope, no way to draw water.

A woman approaches. She comes alone – no friends or neighbours (it's the wrong time of day). She too, no doubt, is hot and thirsty – we'll discover she thirsty for much more than she's yet realised. She doesn't expect anyone to be there. Certainly not a man. (This isn't his role in life, to be drawing water.) Certainly not a Jewish man, in this Samaritan village. This man makes a request, obvious to us: can you give me some water? She's taken aback. It's not what she'd expect – man asking a woman for help; a Jewish man putting himself in debt to a Samaritan woman. He's not supposed even to talk to her. He's certainly not supposed to drink from any vessel she may provide. It's all about identity: they shouldn't be mixing. Different gender identity, different community or cultural identity: they should keep apart. But not mixing means there'll be no refreshing, life-giving water.

Stories had been told around this well for centuries. It's called 'Jacob's Well' but if there's a reference to Jacob digging a well in Genesis, I can't find it. But it does seem he bought some land in the area, and that his son Joseph may have been buried there. But story-telling makes this well Jacob's. And the people could be reassured ... that their families go all the way back to him, that they belong here, that this is part of their story.

But stories become politicised; identities become polarised: it's all you against us. The woman says 'our ancestor Jacob gave it to us' – meaning us Samaritans, not you Jews (although there was no Jew/Samaritan distinction in the time of the patriarchs). Another story was told around this well: the woman points up to Mount Gerizim, looming above them – that's our place, she says: that's where we worship. You Jews say everyone has to go to Jerusalem, and worship on Mount Zion. Two mountains; a great (mental) gap between them. Worship and water have become points of separation, leaving the people spiritually as parched as the landscape.

This man Jesus, a stranger to her, surprises her. He won't accept her definitions of what identifies and separates people. He may not have a bucket and rope, but he confidently offers a different sort of water, living water that will well up to eternal life. This living water is not confined to one place and is not restricted to one community. And worship, he says, is not limited to one mountain – go climb Gerizim, great; go to Jerusalem, even better – but worship the One God in spirit and in truth. The woman has to work out the identity of this man, not just a man, not just Jewish, but first a teacher, then a prophet, then the Messiah himself. Later, coming a second time from her village, she is no longer alone, but with a gaggle of villagers all around; she now at the heart of her community. Through her, others turn and believe, and now they see Jesus for themselves. She, and they, receive the water that wells up to eternal life.

Sadly, the woman at the well remains unidentified in the Bible, but tradition has given her the dignity of a name – Photina – and continued her story as an evangelist and faith leader up until her ultimate martyrdom, possibly in Rome under Nero. If you go to the site of Jacob's Well today, you will find it in the crypt of the Orthodox Church there, offering a place of devotion for Christians of all traditions, for Jews, for Muslims and for the few remaining modern-day Samaritans. But tragically it has also been a place of conflict. In November 1979, a group of hard-line Israeli settlers broke in and demanded the removal of all Christian objects and images. A few days later Archimandrite Philoumenos, the custodian of the church who had done so much to decorate the walls with the story of St Photina, was brutally murdered. Whilst it seems that the killer was a mentally disturbed young man acting alone, you think his actions must have come out of hearing the stories told in divisive ways. Stories continue to matter, and how they are told matters even more.

One final, unconnected story. Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, has spoken about how he learnt, three years after becoming archbishop, that he wasn't quite who he thought he was. The man he'd always believed was his father in fact was not. His biological father was someone different. Does that mean his identity had changed? He said not. What Archbishop Justin had to say is this: 'I find who I am in Christ, not in genetics, and my identity in him never changes.' Once she had found Christ, the Samaritan woman found no other identity was truly significant. That offer is available for all today.