

INTRODUCTION

This is the first thing John records of Jesus' ministry among people. Some had recognised him as the Son of God and others regarded him as an unofficial rabbi. On this occasion his actions surprised everyone involved. If ever a story was designed to destroy preconceived ideas this is it.

ENTER THE STAGE

Two people meet at the village well. Jesus is sitting there, weary with his journey. He had already identified with us in his baptism - even though he was the Son of God. Now he identifies in his tiredness, a hint of the suffering to come. He had been recognised as the Person who would take human sin away. Yet people's expectations were governed by his appearance as a Jewish rabbi.

Then the woman appeared. She must have been socially isolated since she was unlikely come for water at that time of day. She had several failed marriages.

FIRST SURPRISE

She belonged to a community that the Jews despised. And Jewish rabbis of that day regarded women as inferior and did not speak to them. Moreover, he was the Son of God and her life suggested moral failure. Most rabbis would have avoided a person like that.

She was surprised when Jesus began a conversation. So were his disciples.

We may have similar false expectations of God or of Jesus. Some think he would never be interested in them. Others imagine he will only condemn them. "What does he want?" often expresses cynicism about God and man.

SECOND SURPRISE

Jesus spoke about something better than what she already had, and someone greater than who she already knew.

Natural scepticism allied with pride. It might have sounded patronising especially to a prejudiced mind. But it did bring home her ignorance about most important matters. And Jesus had a way of speaking that won her over.

THIRD SURPRISE

His purpose and method were surprising.

First he asked for water to drink, then told her that she would have asked him for a favour if she had only known who he was and what God's gift is.

People do not always perceive God as generous, more as demanding. That sometimes appears as suspicion of the Church. But the gospel is all about God giving.

Many people, if they believe God is generous, imagine it is easy for him - just do it. That is why Jesus spoke about himself. There is method in God's dealings. When there is wrongdoing justice has to be done - which is why Jesus died for our sin. And where there is moral weakness we need the life of God's Spirit - which is why Jesus gives the Holy Spirit to those who ask.

He said to her, "If only you had known you would have asked." There are many things we would ask for if we only knew. But why did Jesus not just give it instead of waiting to be asked? It all has to do with relationship. That was her failure. But her relationship with God was worse than her relationship with her acquaintances. Jesus would reconcile her to God by dying in her place, and would give her spiritual life by the Holy Spirit - but only if she asked. She did. After all this he responded to her request by exposing her problem (and presumably her wrongdoing). It is not the normal way of dealing with people. But sometimes we have to face reality before we can be helped. That was the case here. She could only enjoy God's love if she faced the facts about herself.

Then he challenged her religious beliefs. She referred to the historic disagreement between Samaritans and Jews. But Jesus said that was no longer relevant. As a Spirit God asks for worship that is sincere and a true response to him - not some ritual. Again, she needed to hear this if she was to relate to God.

FOURTH SURPRISE

Her response provided another surprise. She believed in the promised Messiah. The Samaritans shared part of the Bible, and there are strong hints of a coming saviour there. But in view of her lifestyle people would not have expected her to be interested. Not only did she have the information she also trusted him to lead people into the ways of God. What she lacked was a personal relationship with him, so she gained no benefit from him. It was at that point Jesus identified himself as that very Messiah. From then on she could have life in him.

There are many people in society who know more than we think. What they lack is the personal relationship.

FIFTH SURPRISE

The outcome was not what the start of the story suggests. Instead of mutual rejection a relationship developed between this woman and the Son of God. It began through facing the truth about herself and about him. It had immediate results. She brought the men of her village to meet Jesus. They too began to have faith in him. But it was because of his words rather than her testimony. She did not get her curiosity about "living water" satisfied. Instead she drank it without realising. What she got was Christ, not an idea.

WHY WAS THIS WRITTEN?

God has no favouritism.

There is grace for the chief of sinners.

We should not look for academic answers to practical spiritual questions. The answer is a personal relationship with God through Jesus Christ.

If we ask for this God will answer in his own way.