

Sermon on John 4, 5-14, 21.01.2007

The Grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the Love of God and the Communion of the Holy Spirit be with us all. Amen.

Text:

5 So he came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. 6 Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon. 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.) 9 The 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.) 10 Jesus 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.' 11 The woman said to him, 'Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? 12 Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?' 13 Jesus said to her, 'Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, 14but 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.'

Dear Congregation,

This text is not as easy as it seems. It talks about many things and I am pretty sure, that I can not even touch on all of them.

There is the location. Someone, who has been there, wrote: "Today Sychar is called Sycchara. It is in Palestine. The well still exists, but although after copious rains it contains a little water, it is now usually quite dry. It is about 9 feet in diameter and about 75 feet in depth, though in ancient times it was no doubt much deeper, probably twice as deep. The digging of such a well must have been a very laborious and costly undertaking. Unfortunately, the well of Jacob has not escaped that misplaced religious veneration which cannot be satisfied with leaving the object of it as it is, but must build over it a shrine to protect and make it sacred. A series of buildings of various styles, and of different ages, have cumbered the ground, choked up the well, and disfigured the natural beauty and simplicity of the spot. At present the rubbish in the well has been cleared out; but there is still a domed structure over it, and you gaze down the shaft cut in the living rock and see at a depth of 70 feet the surface of the water glimmering with a pale blue light in the darkness, while you notice how the limestone blocks that form its curb have been worn smooth by the ropes of centuries"

But that is where the obvious ends. Everything else concerning this text is a little more complicated than it seems. **There is the conversation**, which at least to my ears sounds strange. Jesus and the Samaritan woman seem to misunderstand each other. Have you noticed that? He talks in some kind metaphorical manner, but the woman thinks he talks about real things, the well, the water in it, and it must have felt weird to he to talk with him and to listen to Jesus' answers. - Someone has analyzed this conversation and remarked: "This is a typical conversation between a man and a woman. 1. He waits until she comes to help him out. 2. He thinks that he is entitled to lecture her. 3. He needs all of her attention and interrupts her daily routine. 4. He does not say clearly what he wants. 5. And all in all he treats her like she can not count until three.

But, dear congregation, this impression is based on an approach which might work to find out whether the location exists or not, but it does not work always when we listen to Jesus talking. We won't get very far in this passage when we take the approach: I only believe what I read; and I take a word for what it says. If we do this we will for sure have the perception that Jesus behaves kind of rude. But this is not the truth the story wants to convey. We have to learn certain things and understand the details of this conversation, or otherwise we will never be able to grasp it.

Let me explain this by leading you through this text: See, when this story was circulated people felt a surprise or were even shocked. Something we completely miss out on, because we would not even know what we should be surprised about. - The surprise lies within the mere fact that he talks to this woman at all. No man was supposed to approach and talk to a woman who was not accompanied by other women or was under the protection of a family member. The second reason not to talk to her is rooted in the circumstance that this woman comes from Samaria. Jews and Samaritans were enemies. They avoided each other, and did not talk to each other. The reason was that the Samaritans had mixed with Assyrian population in the seventh century B.C., the Assyrians had settled in Israel they had conquered the land. Samaritans were believed to have worshipped idols. 150 or so years later the Jews rejected the help of the Samaritans to help to re-erect the temple in Jerusalem, after it had been destroyed. Therefore the Samaritans had built their own Temple on the mountain Garizim, and both side claimed from that moment on to have the legitimate central sanctuary for the Jewish faith; that did not help either to resolve the dispute.

Jesus has obviously no problem with all of that. He talks to her and commands her to give him water. That is the only thing I can not explain. I am still wandering why he could not use the word, we tried to teach our kids, when they ask for something: Please...give me some water!

Then in their conversation there is this **element of misunderstanding**, but that is done on purpose. The reason for that is to slow us as readers down and make us wonder: What is he saying, why is he talking like that? *'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.'* 11 *The woman said to him, 'Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? 12 Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?' 13 Jesus said to her, 'Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, 14but 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.'*

Okay, since we heard it the second time around I guess we would say: "Jesus talks about him as the one, who can give people faith and eternal life." That is not wrong, but still it does not give you any explanation why he is specifically saying that to a Samaritan woman. - The reason has something to do with the well and this well in particular. The woman comes to the well to draw water. And she figures out right away that Jesus is a Jew. She can tell by his accent, as you can tell by my accent that I am German. And the whole time she just stays with this perception that the old problems, the usual circumstances have not changed and will never change. - The story is told this way, that she stays with what she sees. She acts, talks and believes actually like we do, when we stay at the surface of this conversation. She sees the tradition, the things from the past which at one point had united the people of faith in Israel: This well has been given to us by Jacob. Which means: There was some common ground; long time ago, the well was given to all Jews, there was no conflict way back when, but those times will never ever going to come back again. Do you think you are greater than Jacob?

She does not know, but we do that the correct answer is 'Yes', and that the even more accurate answer would be: I am different from Jacob; I am different from all the Jews; and I will not perpetuate the differences between you and me. If you could only see for a moment who I am, says Jesus, than you would ask me that I give you the living water, meaning new faith. A faith which has the capability to overcome all the problems Jews and Samaritans have with each other. A faith which does not ask for retaliation, but for forgiveness.

By the way as the conversation goes on in this chapter, she accepts this faith. She says in the end: (V. 48) *'This is truly the Saviour of the world.'* The whole conversation is embedded in this topic of overcoming the past through the acceptance Christ. This is the key to understand this passage at all. We might struggle a little bit with that, but there is one other indication which would have explained this right away if we only would know: The well is in the bible a place where people get together, literally, because everyone needs water, so all the people from the surrounding area will eventually go there and you could meet them. But on top of that

is the well a place where conflicts are resolved and bonds are made, where you find love, like Isaac found Rebecca. It is the place where you can find consolation, like it happened to Hagar when the Angel met her at a well. It is sometimes also the place to look into the future, because it is believed in many cultures that the well brings the below and the above together, heaven and hell, you see a reflection in the surface of the water, but you know that the water goes deep down. This again might sound strange to us, but was clear to everyone else, when the story was told.

It is not by accident that he meets the woman there. The setting is at a well to connect the past, which the Samaritan woman talks about, with the future Jesus talks about.

I hope this explains what we find here. See, some parts of the bible are easy to comprehend, like Psalm 23: The Lord is my shepherd. We understand right away that this is metaphorical language describing God not actually as a shepherd, but as the one who really cares about us. We immediately understand the meaning of it. But there are other parts where the word of God challenges us. Where we need to find out a little more, do some research, read a commentary, listen to a Pastor to get a more complete picture of the story. If you remember the minister of Ethiopia who read the Prophet Isaiah and had no clue what this text was talking about, Philip showed up and asked: Do you understand what you read? And he said, 'No'; and Philip entered his chariot and explained it to him. There is nothing wrong with that

Some might think now, that this is frustrating that we even have to do some work to understand the book of books. I guess this explains at least why there is a reason that people go to seminary and study theology. But I also hope that you might see it this way: See, there are often, not always, explanations to biblical texts. This does not need to remain a book with seven seals.

I also think that it is good when we do not read the bible like a novel, which we might read once or twice and than it becomes boring. The bible tells us new things every time we read it. It is a book of many layers: There is the surface of the words as such, but there is also a deep well of meaning, knowledge and wisdom which lies underneath it. For me it sometimes hurts when people just stay at the surface and just say: This is was it written, it says here this, and that's what it means! I wanted to show you that at the same time those people will miss a whole lot more, because many times what we call the truth of God needs to be extracted. But when it is found it can be easily applied to our lives. Overcome the past and see the new beginning in Christ I guess you can translate that into your lives pretty easily and you have to do it yourself, because we have run out of time.

Nevertheless, I would like to close with this story which hopefully might encourage you to read the bible more often and to see that there is always a benefit of doing it, although we sometimes struggle with really understanding what we read:

A young man came to a hermit complaining that he was studying the scriptures and the theologians, but as much as he tried he could not keep all those words in his mind, and he felt that all the studying was in vain. The hermit listened to him and then said: Take this old, dirty basket and go to the well over there and bring me some water. The young man picked up the basket, went to the well, drew some water and came back to the hermit. Of course, the water had disappeared, because it ran through all the holes and cracks of the basket. "Go again" the hermit said, and he went. The young man went another time and another time until he finally said: "This does not make sense at all. Why should I go and draw water in this basket when the water does not stay in it?" – The hermit smiled and said to the young man: "Look at the basket how clean it is now! The same thing happens to you with all the words you are reading. You can not contain them, they seem to flow through you, and you think that all your effort is in vain. But without noticing, they have cleared your thoughts and made your heart pure." Amen.

And the Peace of God which passes all understanding, may keep our hearts and minds in Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.