

Sermon on Jacob's Well

Silvia Purdie, for Milson Combined Church, 29 July 2018

I want to tell you about a very special experience I had last year. It was an enormous privilege to visit Jacob's Well, the very same well where Jesus met the Samaritan woman, near her village. SLIDE 1

I was staying in Jerusalem at an Anglican centre called St George's College. Our small tour group, including my son Ben, drove north from Jerusalem along the ridge line, through dry rocky hills. SLIDE 2

until we got to a large concrete wall with lots of razor wire and armed guards. It was a checkpoint, as we were entering a Palestinian territory. Palestinians are not allowed to drive their cars into Israel; they have to walk through the checkpoint and get a taxi into Jerusalem. We had special permission to enter. We drove down into a valley and through a Palestinian city. On the hillside above the city there is an Israeli settlement, new houses built for new Jewish immigrants. We drove through a narrow, scruffy town street, parked the van, and walked to a locked metal gate. In the gate are bullet holes, now all rusty.

SLIDE 3

SLIDE 4

Our guide calls on his cellphone to say we have arrived, and shortly an elderly priest comes and opens the gate for us. He is Greek, and elaborately dressed in robes. We step into an exuberant lush courtyard garden. The morning is still early and the sun is warm without being too hot.

SLIDES 5-8

Brilliant coloured flowers hang, with curious sculptures and tiles.

Along a very old stone paved path we walk to the door of a very large pinkish cream stone church.

SLIDE 9

As we stepped inside our jaws dropped open, as two things hit us:

SLIDE 10

First, the enormous height of the arched ceiling, giving an amazing sense of space and light and a deep quiet within. There is no one else there.

Second, the brilliant coloured paintings and glass hanging inside it, on the walls and suspended in mid air everywhere.

SLIDE 11

We wandered around the church for a few minutes, mainly our heads craning upward taking in all the extraordinary hanging things

Then the priest called us over to some narrow stone steps leading down through a hole in the church floor. From the high light church suddenly we entered a small dark space, a domed roof – and again our senses were assaulted; on the right was a table crowded with things for sale, lots of little bottles of water, and another elderly Greek priest making pictures. Around the walls are crammed with paintings and icons, mostly of the Samaritan woman sitting with Jesus, and more coloured glass lights hang from the ceiling, and in the middle is a strange contraption with ropes and pulleys, which as we form a circle around it, we realise is the well.

SLIDE 12

Our chaplain reads the story from John 4

The ropes and pulleys work a bucket and inside a rim of old smoothed stone is a hole. We peer down but we cannot see the bottom.

We take turns to the drop the bucket down, and turn crank handle to bring it up.

We pour water over our hands and drink the water, which is beautifully sweet and refreshing.

We take turns sitting on the edge and having our photos taken.

SLIDE 13, 14

The well is 41 meters deep. 41 metres. Down. Ben had a wonderful time spilling some water from the bucket and counting the seconds before it hit the water below.

SLIDE 15

Here are some of the art works in there, showing the well, the woman and Jesus.

SLIDE 16

The most fascinating thing about all the paintings I have seen of this event is how dynamic the conversation is, portrayed by the artist.

SLIDE 17

In both of these paintings, see how the woman is leaning in to Jesus, holding her jug in one hand and with the other hand she gesticulates to emphasise the points she is making. It is such an equal, engaged conversation.

SLIDE 18

And there I was, with my son, sitting right there, hearing again that same conversation from 2 thousand years earlier, feeling it reverberating through the centuries all the way to me.

For those of you who are interested in practical things, the well has been in continuous use for at least 4 thousand years, part of Israel's intricate underground system of caves and hidden streams, springs and wells, where its soft rocks have been eroded internally, channeling water through the ground. This particular well gained enormous spiritual significance after John wrote about it in his gospel. A church was built over the well within 300 years of Jesus, knocked down, rebuilt bigger, then when the Crusaders held Israel in the 12th century they built an even bigger church over the top of the Byzantine one, which was then destroyed by the Muslims and left in ruins, but people still came to the well to get water. In 1860 the site was bought by the Greek Orthodox church, and this is the 2nd church they have built on the site – the first destroyed in an earthquake nearly a century ago.

Somewhere along the line some top quality engineers lined the sides of the well with smooth inlaid stones.

I guess it was the Greeks who edged the seat with metal and put up the metal framing and pulley. There's a photo of the crypt in 1934, and the bucket in that photo is the same bucket, looking decidedly newer and less dented than it does today.

So there's my story, of my visit to Jacob's well. So what's the so what? Other people's travel stories don't necessarily take us anywhere. What I want to say to you, out of this travel story, is to affirm the realness of our faith.

First there is the realness of place.

Western society is becoming both more secular and more spiritual at the same time, which means that you have your reality and I have mine, which might or might not include spirituality, which means that people care less and less about facts, and more and more about perceptions. And more and more people no longer think that Jesus was an actual real person – he's become a kind of spirit guide, a vague mythical figure that some people believe in.

Traveling to Israel, and visiting places like Jacob's well, confronted me with the reality of tangible things. Our guide said that Jacob's well is the most historically accurate Biblical site. The well is the well, the very same well that was there in Jesus' day, the very same well that was there in Jacob's day when he bought the field. The stone surround is the same stone; it may have been cut and smoothed over the years, but the stone is the stone. This really is the actually spot where Jesus sat and talked to a local woman, scandalously. And the water itself has a realness that is difficult to describe. It is so fresh, so sweet and pure. Through 4, 5, 6 millenia that water has continued to bubble up, and the deep well has provided safe drinking water, for those with a bucket and a long enough rope! The tangible things and the actual physical places, these are the ground on which metaphor and story and meaning stand, and in our super-spiritual individual world today we need to know that there really is a well in Israel. The story really is true. It really happened.

Second, there is the realness of history. It matters to me that I am part of a long story. Newness is exciting. It's fun to invent something that hasn't existed before. Our culture values the new over the old. We want the latest, not the last-year. We are sold the illusion that stuff is getting better and better, more data, more wifi, more speed, more pixels, more efficient. We have a different story to tell; the church has a long story, solid foundations. And Jacob's well epitomises that. If somehow someone had taken a photo of the well every year since 2000BC and we could watch it all as a time lapse video you would see villages built and burned, nomads and armies come and go, beautiful churches built and knocked down. And through thousands and thousands of years of human history this well has remained, in exactly the same place, giving out exactly the same sweet pure water to all who came. To me that is such a picture of the timelessness of God. We are but a moment in a far longer story. Touching that rock, sitting on that well edge, drinking that water, I felt – not insignificant, not at all, but I was struck by how much bigger God's story is than me. Our churches will rise and fall and others will rebuild, but God endures. Mostly I felt privileged to be part of it.

Third, and most important, the well is about the realness of the Jesus. The well moves us because the Spirit of God is moving, through the living words of holy scripture, to bring us to Jesus himself. The well matters to us because Jesus sat there and spoke there and formed a friendship there that transformed not just the woman's life, but the life of her whole community. Jesus is the living water. Jesus is the one who gives us living water, the Holy Spirit, which becomes a spring welling up for everlasting life – not there in Nablus but here in Milson, inside of you as a congregation and inside of you as individuals. That well of sweet clear refreshing water you carry around within you when you go to work or hospital or home.

Let us pray

Lord Jesus be our well today.

Bring us into your presence, draw us close, sit us down to talk with you.

Give us a bucket, give us rope, that we might draw water, for we are thirsty, thirsty for you.

Give us every day the water that never runs dry,

the spring of life within us, bubbling up for eternal life,

that we might be a source of life and hope, love and grace, for each and every person we meet.

And may all we say and do be for your glory

living Lord, Messiah, who will reveal all things

to the glory of God. Amen.

Call to worship

It's a dry and thirsty land,

come and meet us, Jesus.

We are hungry for your presence

we are thirsty for your Spirit.

Here is water, pure and sweet

but the well is deep, how will we reach it?

Here is holy ground, ancient stories,

here is friendship and connection.

Jesus said: "Give me a drink of water"

The woman said "Why are you asking me?"

Jesus said, "Ask me for water and you will get more than you bargained for."

The woman said "You don't have a bucket."

Jesus said: "The water I give will become a well inside your heart."

The woman said: "Give me that water."

Jesus said: "God is Spirit. Worship him in spirit and in truth."

The woman said: "One day the Messiah will come and all will be revealed."

Jesus said: "I am He."

Memory verse: John 4:14

Those who drink from the water that I give will never get thirsty again. Yes, the water that I give will become a well of water springing up inside, for everlasting life.