

John 4 Living Water

Facebook invites its users to provide some personal information such as where we're from or where we studied, to help people get in touch with each other. One of the categories offered is marital status. We can say we're 'single', 'married', 'in a relationship' or 'It's complicated'!

Perhaps this woman Jesus speaks with in John 4 might describe her life like that – 'It's complicated'. She's been married 5 times, divorced at least 4 and is currently cohabiting with someone without being married. Some people might be quick to criticise and condemn her as a bad person, a 'scarlet woman', guilty party, a villain. Perhaps that's why she's here in the heat of the midday sun when others with their condescending looks and whispers are indoors! But there's something here we should understand.

In 1st century Palestine it was common for men to marry someone much younger and divorce them quickly and easily when they grew tired of them, rather like someone nowadays trading in their car or changing their phone for 'a younger model'. They weren't legally required to provide for an abandoned wife and with no welfare system these young women were extremely vulnerable. I wonder if that is why Jesus seems so opposed to divorce in the Gospels? It was not just breaking a covenant witnessed by God, it could be extremely callous and cruel.

It sounds like this lady may have been abused in this way by numerous men. Now it's not right to live and sleep together if we're not married but before we jump to condemn someone let's try to humbly appreciate their circumstances. This lady may be every bit as much if not more a victim as a villain! She was 'complicated', but in one way or another aren't we all? And while we must never condone sin or try and make wrongdoing somehow respectable, we can learn a lot from how our Lord and Master interacts with this individual.

The New Testament says we all have sinned and 'fall short' of the 'glory' God intends for us. The wonderful encouragement from John 4 is that Jesus was not afraid or unwilling to accept this person with her difficult back story as one of His followers. He came to give His life that sinners like her, like us, could be saved and really live, knowing we are truly loved by Almighty God.

Now let's look at how Jesus treats this woman. At the end of ch 2 John tells us that Jesus knew all men and what was in them so He must have been aware of this woman and her life to date even before they met. Nevertheless the sinless

Son of God is prepared to face misunderstanding and social outrage by being friendly with this woman, even admitting a degree of human vulnerability Himself. He's a thirsty visitor with no bucket! He appears willing to share hers. A Jew drinking from a Samaritan's bucket? This was unthinkable in their culture! Yet He goes further. Using water as an illustration He offers her new life and love as she has never known.

'Whoever drinks the water I give will never thirst,' He says, 'The water I give you will become in you a spring of water welling up to eternal life'!

There is a thirst in the human soul that is much deeper than physical, a thirst for a quality of love and affirmation that satisfies and energises us, making us want to live and rejoice. We can catch occasional glimpses of these things in this present, fallen world but our experiences are sadly imperfect, often disappointing and can leave us frustrated. Jesus promises never-ending, redeeming love and a new life that is constantly refreshing with His living Spirit bubbling inside us!

This makes for all kinds of fresh possibilities. Do we ever feel we have messed up, that it's all over? Apparently not! New beginnings are possible with Jesus!

The Bible does not tell us what happens to this lady after her encounter with Jesus. There is an early tradition that she became a winsome evangelist and was later martyred in Rome. We're not told if she had children or what became of her partner. But going by Jesus' respectful, welcoming attitude and gracious offer of new life, it's reasonable to think He helped her work through and sort out all the issues of her 'complicated' life.

Later in this Gospel Jesus declares, 'All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never drive away.' (6 v 37) He didn't drive this woman away. He won't drive anyone away who comes to Him in sincere penitence and faith.

Her life was 'transformed' from that day on, and that is a very interesting word and idea these days. Quite frequently TV programmes feature people who profess to be unhappy and uncomfortable inside, people who think they could be happier if they could somehow 'transform' or 'transition' themselves on the outside.

A lot of current discussion centres around those who want to change their gender. But that is just one example. More commonly, lots of people are unhappy as our faces and bodies begin to look and feel older. Huge amounts of money and time and effort are spent on clothes and cosmetics, diet and fitness

programmes, drugs and even surgery to try to transform how we are on the outside, in the hope this will give us a new, happier identity inside.

But instead of us trying to change the outside to make the inside feel better, we need to have our insides radically changed - by the Lord. His love and forgiveness and acceptance are the help we need to love and forgive and accept ourselves. The life and wholeness His Spirit brings to our souls emanates outwards, translating into positive attitudes and lifestyle choices of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness and self-control. Our lives become beautiful on the outside because the love of Jesus is making us beautiful on the inside.

The best 'natural cosmetic' is a smile, coming from a happy heart and contented soul, knowing we are loved by Jesus! A soul that is being nourished with this 'living water'!