



On your marks

In his gospel, John records a number of dramatic encounters between individuals and Jesus. As he travelled through Samaria once, Jesus stopped by a well to talk with a woman. The conversation that followed his request for a drink is a master class in how to draw people closer to God and to a living faith of their own. The following idea contains suggestions for exploring this Bible story with a children's group or as part of an all-age service. The storytelling outline in particular will work in many contexts.

Get set

You may need:

- buckets, beaker and water for an opening activity
- a woollen scarf
- a series of bottles and more water for the music activity
- a bowl and jug of water for the reflection and prayer time.

You can find the story in John 4:4-30. There is a retelling of this story in **The Barnabas Children's Bible** (story 273).

Go!

Background

We must not underestimate the outrage that Jesus' disciples would have felt when they discovered Jesus not only talking to a Samaritan but also a woman 'of dubious reputation'. Jesus was always reaching out to the ones nobody else came close to. Samaritans and Jews hated each other. They each had their own ideas of what God was like and where God should be worshipped.

Opening up the story

- The Samaritan woman came to the well to collect water: play a team game that involves transferring water from a bucket at one end of your hall or meeting space to a container at the other. How much can be transferred within a given time?
- The woman would most likely have carried the water away in a jar balanced on her head: try some balancing games. For example, how many small prayer or hymn books can someone balance on their head while moving between points A and B, without dropping any. NB: Using a small piece of coiled material, like a woollen scarf, on your head, will help to create a place to balance items.
- Jesus was thirsty: talk about a time when you were really thirsty. What quenches your thirst best?
- Samaritans and Jews ignored each other completely: try playing a game where one person



attempts to make another person react (with a smile perhaps) while he or she is determined not to. No touching allowed though!

- The conversation between Jesus and the woman moved easily from water to faith: play a game of word tennis between teams or individuals. Give each person or team a target word - for example, drink, friendship, church, happiness and so on - and then play the game in such a way as to try and reach that target word while also stopping the other reaching their target word.

Telling the story

Here is a version of the story you could work from:

Everything happened at the village well. And I don't just mean the well in our story today. I mean *everything* happened at the village well.

The mums met and chatted... and chatted about their children and their grandchildren.

The children of the mums met and chatted... and chatted about their friends and friends' friends.

The visitors to the friends' friends met and chatted... and chatted about how long and hard the journey was.

The animals of the visitors met and chatted(!)... and chatted about... their sore feet and aching limbs.

Oh, and they also fetched some water in between the chatting!

It was basically a chatty sort of place. If you wanted to know anything about anything, then the well was the place to go. A resting place... a refreshing place... a meeting place... a chatting place.

Now, the well in our story was no different. If you wanted to know who was who and what was what in Samaria - that's a small area between Jerusalem in the south and Galilee in the north - then all you had to do was hang around at Jacob's well in Samaria. But, of course, you had to choose the right time to go. The early morning was best or maybe the cool of the evening - it was not a good idea to fetch water in the middle of the day. Who can stand around chatting at the hottest time of the day?

That was why it was so strange on that particular day. You see, the water woman in our story chose to go at midday. And, of course, there was no one there. No one to chat to, no gossip to share and no news to find out. But that is exactly what she wanted. This lady's life was in a mess. People used to call her names and be nasty to her. Ever since she walked out on her husband and had gone off with other men, things had been bad. No one liked her. No one had a good word for her and no one had time for this water woman. So no chat, no talk, no gossip at the well was fine by her. That's why she was there alone in the middle of the day.



Until he came along! This man turned up. A man at a well! At midday! In the heat! He was kindly looking, but he was a stranger. From Jerusalem or maybe Nazareth, but certainly not a Samaritan. Samaritan sorts didn't mix with folk like her.

Perhaps if she kept her head down, he wouldn't bother her and she could get away without any gossip or insults or unkind words. But he spoke to her. This man was different. He spoke to her, a woman – and that was odd enough in those days – but he, an outsider, spoke to her from Samaria. Very unusual! But at least what he said was kind. Just a simple 'Can I have a drink?' He even said 'please'. This man certainly knew how to take someone by surprise. And then came the strangest of conversations.

Woman: *How come you're asking me for a drink?*

Man: *If you knew who I was, you'd ask me for a drink.*

Woman: *But you haven't even got a jar.*

Man: *The drink I'm talking about is like water bubbling up from your inside.*

Woman: *I'll have some of that then (with a laugh)!*

Man: *OK, I'll give you some, bring along your husband.*

Now that did it. He must know all about her – about the mess in her life. But how could he, if he was a stranger? He was clearly someone very special – someone from God, who could see right into your life. She felt uncomfortable and she did what a lot of us do, when we feel that way. She asked a question about something completely different.

Woman: *Which church is best to worship at?*

Man: *It doesn't matter which church you worship at, because it's all about what your worship is like on the inside – in your heart.*

Woman: *Only God's promised rescuer, the one who is coming, can know what people are like on the inside.*

And then came the amazing words: *I am God's promised rescuer.*

The woman opened her eyes wide in amazement. This man was God's promised rescuer. The one God was sending to sort out all the mess of the world; the one who would sort out the mess in our lives; the one who was already sorting out the mess in her life! She became so excited. She forgot about getting water from the well and left the jar on the ground. She rushed back to the village and started to... wait for it... started to chat to the people of the village. Now, she wanted to speak with people and she had some news to share that she could not keep in: *I have met God's promised rescuer. He knows all about me but he's not unkind or cruel. He actually wants to talk to me. It feels*



like water is bubbling up in my heart and I feel clean on the inside.

It wasn't long before the whole village had heard about Jesus because of this woman. They came and found Jesus for themselves and they too experienced that feeling of water bubbling up inside them, as they chatted to Jesus: *It's not just gossip we've heard from you now, they said to the water woman. We have discovered for ourselves that this man, this Jesus, is the promised rescuer, not just for Jerusalem, not just for Galilee, not even just for us in Samaria, but he is the Saviour of the world.*

Key verse: *We know that Jesus really is the Saviour of the world* (John 4:42).

Talking about the story

- Which part of this story do you like the best?
- Which part is the most important?
- Which part surprises you the most?
- Which part puzzles you the most?
- What new things does this story tell us about Jesus?
- Which part of this story is especially important for you this week?

Playing with the story

Jesus arrived at the beginning of the story with a great thirst for water and left the woman at the end with a great thirst, but this time for God!

Fill a series of bottles and jars with water to different levels so that each makes a different sound when tapped. Now, as a group, create a musical version of the story that reflects the different moods of this amazing encounter. Working with different rhythms, volume and tunefulness, find a variety of notes that express tiredness and thirst, shock and surprise, puzzlement, hope, confusion, amazement and joy.

Reflecting on the story

Jesus taught this woman some amazing things about God, starting just with water.

Pour water from a jug into a bowl in the middle of a circle created by your group. Listen to the sound and watch it settle.

Lead a reflection with words such as:

We sometimes think that certain things are so tiny or commonplace that they aren't worth very much. We may use the expression 'it's just a drop in the ocean'. But the truth is that every drop is important. Every drop makes a difference and so does every sincere prayer we make.

Read the following piece slowly, pausing after each line with a space for quiet prayer:



Just a drop in the ocean...

Or could it be the drop that saves a person from dying of thirst? Jesus came to the well with a thirst.

Could it be the drop that causes a full beaker to overflow and so changes everything? The woman's life was turned upside down for the better.

Might it be the drop that excites a greater thirst? The villagers all wanted to know about Jesus for themselves.

Perhaps it is the drop that catches the light and shines out like a jewel, bringing hope? Jesus brought hope for the Samaritans, who the Jews had rejected.

Or maybe that drop is the first tear to melt a stony and angry heart? The woman had been lonely and sad until she met Jesus.

Or could it be the drop of medicine that brings healing to the sick? Jesus is the healer of the world.

People say 'it's just a drop in the ocean' but by God's grace there can be an ocean of good things in every drop.

- I wonder what difference your drop of water will make this week.
- I wonder how it might help to cool those who are angry or upset.
- I wonder how it might tickle a smile out of those who are sad.
- I wonder how it might bring relief to those were struggling.
- I wonder how you might be like a refreshing drop of water today to those who are thirsty.

Prayer

Because every drop can become an ocean of possibilities with God, who, though vast as the ocean, became a drop for us as Jesus, so we might be filled with the ocean of God's love.

Amen.