

## St George's Anglican Church, Epsom

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**John 4 sermon – Conversation that leads to life**

by David Crawley

### Introduction

In a few days' time, volcanoes permitting, I'll be flying to the UK – that wonderful experience of twelve hours on a plane, followed by another twelve hours on a plane, sitting in intimate closeness with perfect strangers ... or perhaps not so perfect ...

[Film clip]

"I'm not much of a conversationalist..." says Neil Page. Actually, I do enjoy *good* conversation. And I've been asking myself, what *is* that – what *is* 'good conversation'? Margaret Millar observes that:

*"Most conversations are simply monologues delivered in the presence of a witness"*

Kind of like a sermon I guess! For me, conversation at its best is when there's a mutual engagement of hearts and minds, and there's a genuine openness to something emerging that neither of us had anticipated.

Martin Buber sees a spiritual dimension to conversation ...

*"When two people relate to each other authentically and humanly, God is the electricity that surges between them."*

Here's a good question, posed by John O'Donohue ...

*"When is the last time that you had a great conversation, a conversation which wasn't just two intersecting monologues... in which you overheard yourself saying things that you never knew you knew, that brought the two of you on to a different plane... a conversation that continued to sing in your mind for weeks afterwards?"*

In terms of today's passage, we might change the metaphor ... "conversation that became a spring which continued to bubble within you for weeks afterwards".

I think we can see that happening for both the woman and Jesus in this conversation in John 4. The woman goes away, bubbling over with excitement about this encounter and what it means. And when the disciples return, Jesus is buzzing with excitement about a harvest that is ready for gathering.

In our series in John's Gospel, we've been thinking about the four Bs: Blessing, Belonging, Believing and Becoming. Today's passage was chosen with 'Believing' in mind. Certainly the Samaritan woman's conversation with Jesus led to believing, and her story in turn led her neighbours toward a believing encounter with Jesus.

According to John, believing is the whole reason he wrote his Gospel. He's literally an Evangelist. Toward the end of his Gospel he writes:

*"Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name." (20:30-31)*

Now, a confession. I'm not an evangelist! When we start to put words like 'conversation' and 'believing' together, and then throw in 'evangelist', my anxiety levels start to rise! I even get nervous when Andrew starts handing out Alpha invitation cards!

I have great admiration for those who have that gift, but in the ranking of my spiritual gifts, evangelism seems - to quote Edmund BlackAdder – to be *“about as low as the ankle socks on a very small beetle crouching in a very deep trench”!*

I remember as a university student and a relatively new Christian having miserably guilty feelings that I should be “witnessing” to my fellow students. But when it came to singing Christian songs in public, or handing out gospel tracts in the quad, or any such activity, I could have quoted BlackAdder again:

*“I’d rather have my tongue beaten wafer thin with a meat tenderizer, and then stapled to the ground with a croquet hoop”.*

To add to my guilt, I had amongst my trusty Navigator memory verses such gems as Romans 1:16: *“I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes”.*

I’m glad to say that now that verse no longer troubles me. Now I actually *welcome* conversations in which my faith and my spiritual journey can feature in a natural way. Rather than thinking about “conversation that leads to belief” – which might conjure up notions of formulaic evangelistic patter – I’d like to take up John’s idea that believing leads to “life.” Let’s think about “conversation that leads to life”, and trust that belief will find its natural place in that context.

What can we learn about conversation that leads to life from this encounter beside Jacob’s Well?

- *Conversation that leads to life ... overcomes ‘us’ and ‘them’ barriers*

John draws attention several times in this passage to the ways this conversation flouted cultural norms. Jews didn’t normally associate with Samaritans. A man, especially a Rabbi, didn’t normally converse alone with a woman. Jesus lets none of that get in the way.

This is a *redemptive* conversation. It points toward Jesus’ mission of peace. Mark McConnell reminded us from Ephesians 2:14-15 that God’s redemptive work in Jesus includes breaking down the barriers, the dividing walls of hostility, and creating in Jesus “one new humanity”.

As redeemed people we are invited to follow suit, and I find that a challenge! It’s so easy to size people up, to pigeon-hole and judge them in ways that sabotage the possibility of relating, as Martin Buber puts it, “authentically and humanly”. Just talking about evangelism can set up “us” and “them” categories in our minds. People, fellow humans beings, become targets, and acquire labels like “unsaved”, “unchurched” or “outsiders”.

Have you ever had a friend who became a zealous salesperson for some new product, and then noticed that they start treating you differently? Somehow you are no longer just a friend or neighbour, but a potential consumer? In my bones I can *feel* the difference between genuine interest in me and my welfare, and the leveraging of friendship on behalf of another agenda.

Iain reminded us a couple of weeks ago that God loves with no strings attached. We’re not called to engage in Spirit-led conversations or acts of blessing because they are proven to be effective church growth strategies. We do it to reflect the heart of God. Does Jesus offer living water as a free gift to encourage buy in to his programme, or because he sees a thirsty woman, and an opportunity to break down walls of hostility that have existed for too long?

When I have the courage to overcome my fears and my prejudices when I meet someone outside my comfort zone, when I risk entering into authentic conversation, I know *I* go away changed. Sometimes disturbed, often enriched, enlarged. And I hope that the conversation leads to life for the other. I may never know.

- *Conversation that leads to life ... involves listening and speaking from the heart*

This conversation by the well unfolds on two levels. There is the literal level - talk of wells and water, husbands, Jews and Samaritans, and so on. But its real power is at the deeper level of the heart. Jesus looks and listens for the deeper truth about this woman and her life. Why does she come to the well in the heat of the day, when the other women would not be there? Why is she on to her sixth relationship? What is she searching for? What is her deeper thirst?

I suspect that in our culture, women often do this heart-level listening more naturally than men. Blokes' conversation can tend to be more about impersonal issues – sport, business, politics, etc. As competitive critters we are more inclined to put forward our strengths and hide our vulnerabilities. But, speaking for myself at least, that doesn't mean we don't have the desire or the ability to talk about deeper issues, including spiritual issues. At the men's weekend at Whatipu last year I recall some stunning conversations, of the kind we're talking about here.

One of the things that might inhibit us from going to deeper places in conversation is the fear that the other person would not be interested in spiritual things, or might even be hostile. That's possible. But my hunch is that many people *are* thirsty. Their thirst may be driving them to look all in the wrong places – as we see here in the woman and her relationship patterns – but the thirst is genuine. God-given in fact.

In the UK the Religious Experience Research Unit set up at Oxford University has been investigating spiritual experience among adults in Britain for over 40 years. In 1987 their surveys showed that 48% of people claimed that they were personally aware of a spiritual dimension to their experience. You may think that that is quite a high proportion, but in a similar survey in 2000 that figure rose to 75%. Interesting when in the same period, regular church attendance saw a significant decline.

You can see on the screen the kinds of things that people named as spiritual experience ...

- *Awareness of a pattern of meaning in their lives, not of their own making (55%)*
- *Awareness of the presence of 'God' (38%)*
- *Help through prayer (37%)*
- *A sacred presence in nature (29%)*
- *Connection with someone who has died (25%)*
- *Awareness of an evil presence (25%)*

I don't have equivalent figures for New Zealand, but my own experience would suggest that our figures are also higher than we might think. When someone asks me what I do, and I say I teach in the area of spirituality, the response is often, "How interesting!" and then I hear something of their own thoughts and experience.

I'm not a natural at this, but I'm trying to learn from Jesus, the Master of listening and speaking from the heart. I'm asking his Spirit to help me hear the longing below the laughs, the heart cry beneath the cynicism, the tenderness that's masquerading as toughness, and to risk moving sensitively into that territory.

A third and final thought ...

- *Conversation that leads to life ... stories the possibilities of grace*

When John tells his readers at the end of his Gospel that he has written these things so that they might believe in Jesus, and have life in his name, what is it that he has written? A *narrative*, a story, about the Word made flesh.

Not a set of propositions or proofs, but redemptive stories. About a person he watched provide wine for a wedding party, bread for a hungry crowd, healing for a cripple, sight for a blind man, forgiveness for a woman caught in bed with the wrong man, a brother brought back to life for his friends Mary and Martha ... and “many other signs”, says John. Stories that show what’s possible when the grace of God in Jesus gains entry to ordinary, flawed, up and down human lives.

In this conversation, Jesus offers intriguing hints to the woman that the destructive story she has been playing out is not the only one possible. What if life could be more than lurching from one disappointing relationship to another? What if God were offering her a gift that could be the beginning of a *new* story? What if that gift could even undo the old hostilities between Jew and Samaritans, and make the old arguments about where and how to worship irrelevant? And more than offering tantalizing hints, Jesus offers himself. In the way he speaks to her and relates to her, he *embodies* the possibilities of grace and the hope of a different way.

This is how I think now about conversations that might turn to spiritual matters. I don’t have to sell a product or prove a proposition. I don’t have to follow a pat formula, or convince people of their need. Most people know their need, their brokenness. What they struggle to find are redemptive alternatives to the stories they find themselves stuck in.

Have you ever noticed how many movies follow a redemptive plot line? *Gran Torino*, *As it is in Heaven*, *The Green Mile*, *Shawshank Redemption*. People are drawn to compelling stories of redemption and grace. They are *thirsty* for them, because they long to see redemptive possibilities in their own circumstances and in our world.

What I bring to conversation, then, is my own ordinary up and down story, including the surprising ways in which grace has appeared in my own life at key moments, and helped me find my way. I *can* take up Paul’s words, “I am not ashamed of the gospel ...”, because the gospel is no longer a package I’m supposed to be selling to unwilling punters. It’s a story. A story of brokenness intersected by healing grace and love. It’s *my* story, but it’s also *God’s* story. It’s the Word made flesh. In any conversation that deepens into a sharing of the realities of life, of hopes and disappointments, of dreams and worries, this is what I can do – story the possibilities of grace.

As Paul says in 2 Corinthians 2, we are not called to be “peddlers” of the word of God, but people who have the aroma of Jesus about us.

What’s your story? Where does the story of God’s redeeming, reconciling grace intersect your story? Can you talk about this in a simple, authentic way without jargon?

### *Conclusion*

Jesus shows us the way, and it’s challenging, but possible with the Spirit’s help: crossing the cultural and religious barriers, learning to listen and speak from the heart, and sharing our own human story of the redemptive possibilities of grace.

The invitation is to start right here, at St George’s, with one another.

Our verse for the week, from Psalm 84, says that those whose hearts are set on pilgrimage will pass through the Valley of Baka, the Valley of Weeping, and make it a place of springs. Jesus certainly fulfilled that picture when he stopped by the well on his way to Galilee. May our conversations with each other here, and with all those who thirst for life, also become springs of life and hope.

*Song to the Holy Spirit (NZPB, 157) as responsive prayer to conclude*

**James K Baxter's 'Song to the Holy Spirit'**

Lord, Holy Spirit,  
You blow like the wind in a thousand paddocks.

*Inside and outside the fences,  
You blow where you wish to blow.*

Lord, Holy Spirit,  
You are the sun who shines on the little plant.

*You warm him gently, you give him life,  
You raise him up to become a tree with many leaves.*

Lord, Holy Spirit,  
You are the mother eagle with her young,  
Holding them in peace under your feathers.

*On the highest mountain you have built your nest,  
Above the valley, above the storms of the world,  
Where no hunter ever comes.*

Lord, Holy Spirit,  
You are the bright cloud in whom we hide.  
In whom we know already that the battle has been won.

*You bring us to our Brother Jesus,  
To rest our heads upon his shoulder.*

Lord, Holy Spirit,  
You are the kind fire who does not cease to burn.

*Consuming us with flames of love and peace,  
Driving us out like sparks to set the world on fire.*

Lord, Holy Spirit.  
In the love of friends you are building a new house,  
Heaven is with us when you are with us.

*You are singing your song in the hearts of the poor,  
Guide us, wound us, heal us,  
Bring us to the Father.*

Amen.