



Christ and the Samaritan Woman at the Well, Byzantine Mosaic, Basilica of San Marco, Venice, Italy

Located among the numerous golden scenes found in St. Mark's Basilica in Venice, Italy, this Byzantine mosaic depicts Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well (see John 4:1–43). Its shimmering golden background highlights the importance of the conversation taking place between Jesus and the woman, which St. Pope John Paul II described, saying "[Jesus] *discusses the most profound mysteries of God with her*. He speaks to her of God's infinite gift of love" (*Mulieris Dignitatem*, 15, emphasis in original)

Rather than presenting us with a single scene, the mosaic is divided into two parts, providing a pictorial narrative. Recall John 4:1–43. What two events are depicted in the mosaic?

The narrative begins on the left with the encounter and conversation between Jesus and the woman. Two of the disciples stand behind Jesus. While not identified, we can discern St. Peter, with his curly white hair and beard, and St. John, whose gospel recounts this story, with his youthful clean-shaven face. Not wanting to inquire of Jesus, St. John directs his attention to St. Peter, "marvel[ing] that [Jesus] was talking with a woman" (John 4:27). Jesus' whole attention is directed toward the woman, as he extends his right hand in blessing. The woman had come to the well for water, but her pitcher appears empty, as if it is almost parallel to the ground. Instead of reaching her jar towards the well, she reaches out her opened right hand to receive something more precious than the water for which she came. At the top of the scene, the Latin inscription "*Dat Potum Sane Fons Vivus Samaritane*" proclaims: "A living fountain gives a drink healthily to the

Samaritan.” While the Latin “*sane*” could be translated as “discreetly,” which also applies as the Apostles were initially away when Jesus first encounters the Samaritan woman, “healthily” gives a sense of the healing and spiritual restoration that happens in the woman’s life as a result of her encounter with Jesus.

Most interesting about this scene is its portrayal of the well. Byzantine artistic style seeks to depict the reality of a scene more deeply than a literal photograph could ever picture, by showing the viewer the rich meaning inherent in a scene by employing iconic and allegorical symbols. Here, the well, with its four lobes, takes a cruciform shape and recalls the common shape of an early baptistery. Thus in the mosaic’s iconography, the well is given baptismal significance. Behind the well is a tree, a likely reminder that in Baptism we are given access to the Tree of Life, from which Adam and Eve and their descendants were cut off after Original Sin. The living waters welling up to eternal life that Jesus speaks of to the Samaritan woman are received at Baptism with the gift of the Spirit and the indwelling of the Holy Trinity in the soul of each of the baptized. Christians viewing this mosaic were to understand that the gift promised to the Samaritan woman had also been given to each of them.

The scene on the right shows the Samaritan woman a second time, but now she is back in the town speaking to its people. Sin had made her an outcast, having to draw water in the heat of mid-day. But after encountering Jesus at the well and receiving forgiveness and salvation, the Samaritan woman becomes a missionary. “Having received a greater and more important gift than mere water from a well, she leaves her jar behind (cf. John 4:28) and runs back to tell her townspeople that she has met the Christ (cf. John 4:29). Her encounter with Jesus restored meaning and joy to her life, and she felt the desire to share this with others” (Pope Francis, Homily, January 25, 2015). The smaller Latin inscription on the right, “*Venite Videte Quem Quia Dixit Omnia Quae Fecit*” —“Come, see the man who said everything I have done” —recalls the woman’s words as she returns to the town. Her words, “Come, see...” are also an invitation for us to encounter Jesus in prayer. And as we more deeply encounter Jesus, as we begin to hear and listen to him in our prayer, we too will know the joy of the Samaritan woman and want to share it with others.