There is an element of Greatest Hits at the moment in the Gospel readings where we are invited to come face to face with the Living God. Last week we sat and listened, in the shadows, as Nicodemus came hesitantly to the Light in the darkness and left, unsettled and uncertain. Soon we will stand with the mourners as Jesus raises his friend, Lazarus, from the lightless, hopeless grave. And today we find ourselves eavesdropping on a conversation between a woman of Samaria who comes to fetch water and the weary Jesus, resting by her well. Their wordplay dances like the sunshine on tumbling water droplets, playful and testing and utterly delightful.

It has long been one of my very favourite Gospel stories- it is so undefended, so daily, so believable. It is a model of discipleship as well, of bearing witness- the town come to Jesus because of her witness, which should be a huge encouragement to each of us as well. We don’t need to be specially trained in bearing witness, or particularly eloquent or attractive- we just need to be people in relationship with others who are thrilled to find their lives turned upside down when we come face to face with Jesus.

It is also one of my favourite encounters because of the amazing sculpture by the Broadbent Studios which was installed in Chester Cathedral cloister in 1994. Chester is my home Cathedral. I went to my selection conference for ordination there. I was ordained deacon and then priest there. I went to Maundy Thursday Services for 10 years. It was and is a very special place and a very special piece of art and I always found time to sit and pray whenever I was there. I have brough the painting of it from my study which is on the table… It is balanced and poetic and true. Jesus and the woman form a circle, their faces close, gazing at each other with love and understanding and acceptance and hope.

I love it even more today. Cara is off sick as you know, and we will pray for her recovery and well-being today - hello, Cara, we can’t wait to have you back here in the pulpit and at the altar: but she made time this week to send me a link to a fabulous website called Knowyourmothers, which contains biographies by Cara Quinn of most of the women in the Bible, along with a lovely piece of art, which Cara Quinn has created.

In the Orthodox tradition the woman at the well has been given the name Photini, which helps us to see her as flesh and blood, as real as we are. And reading her exploration of this reading made me realise that I understood hardly any of it at all.

For example, we understand something of her marginalisation because she is a Samaritan but we don’t fully appreciate her marginalisation as a woman, the things she has endured and overcome. We hear that she has been married five times and radition has it that this means that she was of dubious character (which is strikingly similar to the way we have elided Mary Magdalen with other, unnamed Gospel women who have been caught in adultery). Quinn argues compellingly that that simply cannot be the case. If she were a convicted adulteress noone else would marry her. If she were the adulteress we often hear about her town would have come to faith because of her testimony. Since only men could demand a divorce, the most likely reality is that a series of men married and then divorced her, rejecting her in a world where women were seen as property, perhaps because she could not conceive. Perhaps she was widowed over and over again.

Whichever it is, neither of them imply any fault on her part. Whatever the truth, we are clearly meeting in Photini a woman who has been through a huge amount of grief, dependency, insecurity, disempowerment, sorrow- and retained the respect and love of her community through it all.

And Jesus sees all of this- he is not judging her when she says that she has been married five times- he is seeing her, truly seeing her, in a way that she is probably not used to. She blooms under the encouragement of this stranger, this Jew, who she stumbles across at her well, some distance from her city. He sees her, which takes us right back to the tender and timeless gaze of Jesus and Photini in the cloister statue.

This is the longest recorded conversation anyone has with Jesus. Photini stretches and presses Jesus. Photini focuses in on the biggest issue which comes between Jews and Samaritans- where worship may be offered. She realises that this might be the Messiah and she hurries back to the city, to her friends and neighbours, to tell them her stunning and joyous news. They rush back with her, and they see Jesus for themselves. She helps them, allows them, enables them to believe. She opens a gift to them- the gift of life, light, of living water.

And Jesus opens himself to her. Compare the tight and distrustful conversation with Nicodemus we looked at last week with the way that Jesus responds so joyously to one who just wants to find the truth, or to be found by truth. He is relaxed, unflustered, delighting in the conversation. He gives her three great gifts- of acceptance after a lifetime of not being taken seriously, of living water which will never run dry and of the chance to go to her own people and be an evangelist, carrying living water to them.

The thing to remember and relish today is what we learn because of her- the witness she give to us just as she bore witness to her neighbours- is twofold. Firstly, there is no barrier Jesus will not cross and does not cross to find us. It is true for this woman of Samaria, who has had a lifetime of being overlooked, undervalued, unnoticed- and it is true for us in all of the ways that we get lost- through busyness and dull routine, through pressure and sickness and grief and self-doubt and despair, and all of the other ways which we allow ourselves to become distanced from God. Social division, discrimination, injustice, insecurity, every act of bullying and rejection and cruelty; every barrier, every obstacle, every gap, every hiding-place, every fear- Jesus will come and find us. Because he has already come to find us.

And secondly, we too are called and invited to bear witness in exactly the same way as Photini- by simply going to our friends and neighbours and saying that we have been found by God’s anointed. What compels and attracts even more than our words is the look on our face and the dance of our eyes and the depth of our smile when we talk of Jesus.

In giving Photini a name and a face Cara Quinn rights a great wrong, and offers us an inspiring saint to model our lives on. Let us today give thanks for her vibrant courage, her honest questions and her lasting witness. And let us let her guide us back to the well of Living Water, where Jesus waits, and offers us himself, and sees us. And sees us. And holds out his hands. And smiles.