



The
United
Reformed
Church

The United Reformed Church in Lion Walk
Christ Church United Reformed Church
The United Reformed Church in Chappel

Sunday 12th March 2023

Call to Worship:

May we dream of a world made new,
Where together we shout for justice,
And as one we fight against oppression.
May we dream of a world made new,
Where together we seek God's righteousness
And as one we sing God's praise.
May we dream of a world made new,
Where together we climb God's mountain,
And as one we enter the promised land.
May we dream of a world made new,
Where together we proclaim the good news of God's kingdom,
And as one we enjoy its peace, and abundance and love.

Come, all who are thirsty, says Jesus our Lord:
come, all who are weak, taste the living water
that I shall give.

Dip your hands in the stream, refresh body and soul,
drink from it, depend on it, for this water will never run dry.
Come, all who are thirsty, says Jesus, our Lord.

Prayer/Meditation:

Welcoming Jesus,
we come to you at the well,
from all walks & seasons of life,
from all circumstances,
and in every mood.

Some of us are eager, curious.
Some of us are defensive and worried.
Some of us are tired or lonely.
But most of all, we are
thankful that we are here and
thankful you're here.

Please be gracious and kind
as we pour out our stories.
Hear our grief...
Know our joy...
Receive our questions.

We still have not learned to be
satisfied by your abundance.
Pour out life for us yet again
and renew us by your mercy.

God of Living Water, you call us to come and drink.
So why do we sit here and complain that there is not enough water?
You call us to strike the rocks of our world and let your Living Water flow.
But we do not trust enough that the spring is there.
We want to find the water on our own, using our own wisdom.
You call us to share the Water of Life with the world around us.
But we believe that the water is limited,
not abundant and so we are tempted to save it for ourselves.
For all the times we turn away from your Water,
for all the times we sully the Water by misusing it,
for all the times we let others go thirsty instead of offering a drink,
Forgive us we pray.

...time of silent prayer...

The Water of Life flows with abundance to fill us with hope,
to cleanse us of our guilt, to float us to a new life.
Washed in the Living Water,
we are forgiven and set free to live abundant life.

Everlasting God, you are everywhere and right here.
As close as the air we breathe,
the air which binds us one to another and all to your beautiful creation.
You are as close as the sunlight on our skin,
as close as the rain that drips from our hair;
the wind and the water that push us and lead us
and call us again and again into relationship with one another and with you.
Holy Spirit, divine Advocate, guide and encourage us.
Stir within our hearts,
that we may speak anew the familiar words that Jesus taught us...

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name; thy Kingdom come; thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the Kingdom, the power and the glory for ever. Amen

Reading: John 4:5-30

HYMN 489: Be thou my vision

Reading: John 4:31-42

Reflection:

The story we just heard about Jesus talking with a Samaritan woman at the well outside Sychar is a story full of surprises.

The first surprise is that the conversation happens at all. Jesus is a Jew and the woman is a Samaritan. Between Samaritan and Jew there is a wall of separation like that today between the Israeli and the Palestinian.

The Jews and Samaritans are related peoples. Both are Hebrews. The Samaritans are from the old northern kingdom of Israel, while the Jews are from the old southern kingdom of Judah. The Samaritans inter-married with non-Jewish peoples and lost much of their ethnic identity, while the Jews maintained theirs. Each group ended up with their own temple, the Samaritans on Mount Gerizim, the Jews on Mount Zion. And so it is a strange choice Jesus makes to travel through Samaritan territory, and even stranger that he strikes up a conversation with a Samaritan woman.

In that place and time, men and women are not to talk to one another in public. It is not considered proper. Especially when the man is, like Jesus, a rabbi, a teacher, someone looked up to as an example of propriety. And so the disciples, when they return, are astonished that Jesus is speaking with a woman.

The nameless one is a Samaritan, and a woman. She is also someone rejected by her own people. She comes to the well to draw water at noon, and she comes alone. Noon is the hottest time of the day. Morning and evening are times to do the hard work of drawing water from the well and hauling it home. This is work that women do in company with one another. It is a chance for a chat, for some social contact. But this woman goes to the well at a time when she will be alone. She sees herself as a misfit. She avoids others in order not to be hurt yet again by their words, their attitudes, their hard looks.

It's a surprise that Jesus promises living water. Living water is water that flows, that runs, that sparkles. Such water is a welcome change from water in wells that may be muddy or stagnant..

At first the woman presumes that Jesus is talking about some hidden stream he knows that is far better than this well. She wants the equivalent of running water in her kitchen, so she won't have to haul buckets any more. But what Jesus promises is a source of life in her heart, so that she can truly live. She is confused about what he offers, yet she understands it is something she needs, and needs desperately.

It's a surprise that Jesus knows the details of this stranger's life. These details remain unclear to us, but apparently she has had a painful and unhappy time. She's had five husbands. Did the marriages end through death, or divorce, or desertion? Were they truly marriages, or something else? Why is her current husband not truly her husband? We don't have answers to these questions, and we really don't need to have them. Yet we recognize that this woman feels alone and exiles herself from her neighbours.

The woman is surprised that Jesus knows the truth about her. She is even more surprised that, knowing the truth, he accepts her. For her, this is an encounter with the holy. The man must be a prophet.

And another surprise. The woman asks Jesus to resolve the long-standing and divisive question of who is right: Jews or Samaritans? Where is the correct temple: Gerizim or Jerusalem? The surprise comes when Jesus says that worship will no longer depend on location, but will be a matter of spirit and truth.

The conversation ends with one more surprise. The woman confesses her faith in the messiah who is to come, and Jesus says he is that messiah. Jesus reveals his identity not to his disciples, not to his own people, not to their religious leaders, but to this person who is marginal three times over: She is a Samaritan, a woman and an exile among her own kind. We do not even know her name, yet Jesus entrusts her with his deepest secret, the truth of who he is.

The conversation ends because the disciples come back from their trip to buy food, but the surprises do not end. The woman leaves her water jar there at the well. It is valuable, yet it is heavy, and she wants to be unencumbered as she runs back into the city.

There in Sychar, she tells the people to come and see Jesus. “Come and see the man who told me everything I have ever done! Can he be the Messiah?”

Soon a crowd follows her out to the well. This crowd is so large that Jesus compares it to a field ready to be harvested. These people have accepted the woman’s testimony, and they are coming to Jesus.

It’s a surprise that someone like this bears witness. After all, she is a reject among her own people, a woman with no name, no social standing. Her experience with Jesus is very brief, she has no training, she has not been given a commission. It’s a surprise that people listen to her. Yet they do, for there is something attractive, compelling and authentic about her witness. She may be a woman of questionable character, or at least she has had plenty of experience with the rough side of life.

True, her understanding of Jesus is far from complete.

Yet she bears witness based on her personal experience. She speaks of what she knows.

Her focus is on Jesus, not on herself.

And not only does she point her own people to Jesus, but she shows us how we can witness to him.

We don’t need to have our life together in every way. We don’t need to know all there is to know. What we *can* do is tell others about our experience.

We can help people to look, not at us, but over our shoulder at Jesus, who stands close behind us.

Then soon enough they will forget about our witness, and say, along with those people from Sychar, “It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Saviour of the world.”

God surprises us in many ways, but none is more surprising than the effectiveness of witnessing to Christ by telling our own story.

HYMN 35: God is unique and one

Prayer :

God,
like the Israelites in the wilderness,
we too have known Your love,
and experienced Your care and provision.
You invite us to extend that love to the world around us—
to care for others as deeply as we care for ourselves.
And so we bring the needs of our world before You now.
In Your mercy, hear our prayer.

We pray for the many who do not have enough:
enough food to eat, or shelter to keep warm;
enough employment, or money to pay their bills;
enough medicine or medical care.
Lord, in Your mercy, hear our prayer.

We also pray for those who have more than enough,

but who still struggle to find meaning and purpose in life;
who indulge in dangerous or self-serving activities
to dull their pain or loneliness.
Lord, in Your mercy, hear our prayer.

God, Your grace reaches out to all of us.
You call us to live as citizens of heaven,
working together with one heart and mind.
Strengthen us to live in a manner worthy
of the Good News we have received,
offering our lives in service of Your kingdom,
where the last are first, and the first are last,
and there is grace enough for all.
Lord, in Your mercy, hear our prayer.

In the name of Jesus Christ, our Saviour and Lord.

I invite you now to spend a few moments with your own prayer, in words or in silence; or simply in reflecting upon the stories we have read and the words we have heard in our worship today.

Loving God, hear our prayer, which we offer in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen

HYMN 626: Judge eternal, throned in splendour

Benediction

May we find the road that leads to life;
may we take the turns that brings right relationships;
may we pause to accompany others on the way;
and may we journey with God through Lent,
and long for the horizon and dawn.

So may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit
be with each one of us, and with all those we love, today and for ever more.

Amen