

The Bridgwater Drive Church, 12 March 2023

Call to worship (inspired by Psalm 95)

O come, let us sing to the Lord:
let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation!
Let us come into God's presence with thanksgiving;
let us make a joyful noise to God with songs of praise!
For the Lord is a great God,
and a great King above all gods.
O come, let us kneel before the Lord our Maker!

Hymn Sing to the Lord a joyful song MP 929

Offering

God of the wilderness,
We give these offerings in gratitude,
rejoicing in the abundance of your gifts to us.
We give these offerings in faith,
trusting that you will provide for our needs.
We give these offerings in hope,
knowing you can use them to spread your love in this world.
And with these offerings, we give ourselves;
May we live with generous hearts, with open hands. Amen

Opening Prayer

Enduring Presence, goal and guide,
you go before and await our coming.
Only our thirst compels us beyond complaint to conversation,
beyond rejection to relationship.
Pour your love into our hearts, that, refreshed and renewed,
we may invite others to the living water
given to us in Jesus Christ our Lord.

Holy God, when our natural fears and anxieties push you to the margins of our lives
Lord have mercy
When we are so preoccupied with ourselves and our concerns that we
have no time to seek first your kingdom or put our trust in you
Christ have mercy
When disappointment leads to doubt, when fear hinders faith
and we cannot see the glory which will be
Lord have mercy

Lord, we pray for our church family. We confess our failings and lack of compassion and love. We thank you that you forgive our failings and we ask you to graciously give us a spirit of love and forgiveness that sees only the good in each other, that bears no grudges and forgives all grievances. May we learn to forgive even as you have forgiven us, that we may live together in unity. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen

Hymn Jesus lover of my soul MP 372

Bible readings: **Exodus 17:1-7**
 John 4:5-42

In our reading from the Old Testament, in Exodus, we have Moses getting water out of a rock. God is yet again providing for the people. Having quashed their hunger with manna from heaven, God now quenches their thirst by producing water from a rock. This miracle,

this gift showing the love of God, comes after the Israelites have yet again questioned and tested God. They are not trusting in God or their leader Moses; but are quarrelling among themselves and arguing with long-suffering Moses and with the Lord. But, as many times before in bringing the people out of Egypt and in the wilderness, God showed that he was among them and all they needed was a bit more faith.

The place was called Massah and Meribah because the people tested and quarrelled with the Lord. The second part of Psalm 95, the part we didn't hear in the call to worship says, 'O that today you would listen to God's voice. Do not harden your hearts as at Massah and Meribah when your ancestors tested me.' We heard something similar two weeks ago on the first Sunday of Lent when Jesus was tempted and he quotes Scripture to the Tempter, saying it is written 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.' In Lent, it is good to test ourselves, but never to test God. (Questioning is fine – psalms) Perhaps rather than giving up something this Lent, we can strive to put aside all quarrelling and disagreements and testing the wisdom and timing of God, and trust more faithfully that the Lord knows what the Lord is doing.

The next reading in the lectionary for today comes from Romans chapter 5, the first 11 verses. We did not read it as the story about the Samaritan woman is so long. As with the passage from Exodus, I'm just going to give you a potted version of what Paul was talking about as I lead into us exploring the story of the Samaritan woman and Jesus. For Paul, suffering produces endurance, which produces character, which leads to hope. It was a standard joke in our house growing up that anything you didn't want to do, but had to do, was 'character building' and there may be some unpalatable truth in that, but we do not suffer in vain, nor for the sake of suffering. The hope that is the ultimate result of this chain of events, is not a hope in which we will be disappointed. It is not a hope in worldly things that tend to let us down, or a hope in humans, who also sometimes let us down; God's hope will not disappoint because God's love has been poured into us through the Holy Spirit and through the gift of God's Son who died for us. God has proved God's love in indescribable ways and beyond measure, through the ultimate gift of Jesus Christ.

It feels like that is already more than enough for one sermon, but the lectionary then provides us with the gift of the Samaritan woman talking to Jesus at the well. With such a well-known story, there are inevitably several interpretive paths one can go down. There is the feminist view. The view that the woman is a theologian who engages Jesus in intelligent, theological debate and then goes and shares the good news.

There is the woman as evangelist, comparing her to Nicodemus the Pharisee who we heard about last week (or perhaps not with John Amos) who sneaks around to meet Jesus by

night and after a mere nine verses slips away again. Nicodemus says and does nothing of note, at least in our first encounter with him in John 3. His last word is a question to Jesus – How can these things be? He doubts, whereas the woman believes and asks almost immediately, for the living water Jesus has on offer. She believes because Jesus knows her and tells her everything she has ever done; and many Samaritans from the city believed in Jesus because of her testimony. On the strength of which, some commentators say the story was written by John to account for the large component of Samaritans in early Christian communities.

We could think about Jesus' authority and his gift of living water, which links nicely with Moses striking the rock to produce water. Or, leaving aside the woman and the ethnic rivalry between Jews and Samaritans, we could look at doing the will of the Father and reaping where we have not sown. But the interpretation I want to focus on today is the view that this story in John provides something that none of the other gospels do – it gives guidance on how to deal with divisions, especially long-standing ones.

The well is in what might be called enemy territory. There has been enmity between Jews and Samaritans for centuries by this point. From a Jewish point of view, Samaria was guilty of false worship and consorting with Judah's enemies, and yet John portrays the Samaritans as a people who are accepted. The past may not be forgotten, but it is forgiven. Jesus talks to the woman, and she responds. They engage in civilised, deep conversation and on the basis of her account to her fellow townspeople they invite Jesus to stay with them for a further two days.

Jesus builds community by crossing ethnic and gender boundaries, by engaging the woman in a valid and serious conversation and she likewise crosses boundaries. Jesus trusts her with knowledge, with the mysteries of living water and the knowledge of who he is, that he is the Messiah, something he has hidden from other people and even from the disciples in the other gospels until much nearer the end of his life. Through his conversation with the woman, Jesus learns inclusiveness. He learns that his mission is not only to the Jews, but to all people. The Samaritans of the city of Sychar came to Jesus, not the other way round, and asked him to stay with them, and he accepted their invitation and many more believed.

The Samaritans who hear and believe, proclaim Jesus as the Saviour of the World, not just the saviour of the Jews, or just the Gentiles, or just the known world of Israel and the Middle East, but saviour of the whole world. This speaks of a new consciousness, of wanting to overcome cultural and national differences, of wanting to be one in Christ. Community can only be built when we give up old prejudices. When we are not afraid to go outside our

comfort zone and extend an invitation to a stranger, or to accept an invitation. And it doesn't always pay to wait. Sometimes we need to see that the harvest is ready ahead of time.

Jesus says, Do not say four months more, or two years more, or in five year's time, but look around you, the fields are ripe for harvesting now.

John's story ends with 'many believed because of his word.' It sounds like the end, but actually it's the beginning. The beginning of building a community; after that they had to build the church, elect the elders, decide which hymns to sing from which hymn book, write the prayers, argue over how to serve the Lord's supper and generally learn how to muddle along as the people of God. Sometimes what feels like the end, is often just the start.

Hymn There's a wideness in God's mercy MP 683 omit v2

LORD'S SUPPER

Jesus calls us to the well, inviting us to drink of the Living Water, and the life eternal. Jesus calls us out of the shadows, out of our perpetual thirst for more material things to be entirely known, and entirely filled with God's presence.

Jesus calls us all: all who are made in God's own image, all who breathe the breath of God's spirit: the Spirit of Life.

Jesus calls us to the table, to the meal that nourishes our bodies; that quenches our thirst, that calls us into one Body, living in Christ.

Jesus calls us, here and now. Come to this table, you who are beloved in Christ. Come, not because you must, but because you may.

The Lord be with you.

And also with you.

Lift up your hearts.

We lift them to the Lord.

Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.

It is right to give our thanks and praise.

Holy God, source of all being, you are greater by far than our human thoughts can comprehend. With all that you have created, you abide;

weeping with us in grief and pain, rejoicing with us in life and love.

You are everywhere in this very moment; holding the entirety of living experience and weaving us together in the great and intricate tapestry of Creation.

Creator God, mother and father of us all, in your holy love you took on our limitations.

Born of a body, bound within a body, you know the whole of this human experience.

Learning to communicate with words; teaching us to communicate with presence.

Learning the fears that wring us dry; teaching us of the love that nurtures us back to 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...

Saying **Our Father... Amen**

Come, Creator God renew the face of the earth;
Come, eternal Saviour remake us in your likeness;
Come, Holy Spirit, transform these gifts that Christ may be known to us in the breaking of the bread and that we may be strengthened to serve him in the world. Amen

On the night when he was betrayed, Jesus took bread and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, this is my body which is broken for you. Do this in remembrance of me. In the same way he took the cup after supper saying, this cup is the new covenant in my blood, Do this as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me. For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

Sharing of bread and wine

Prayer after communion

Most gracious God, we thank you for what you have given us.
You have fed us with the bread of life and renewed us for your service.
Now we give ourselves to you, and ask that our daily living
may be part of the life of your kingdom,
and that our love may be your love
reaching out into the life of the world, through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen**

Prayers of intercession

God, You are a God of compassion and love.
Time after time we have experienced your care and provision.
Time after time You've answered our prayers and met our needs
often in ways we could never have dreamed possible.
We praise You for Your faithful love toward us.
Because we have known Your love,
we come to You with confidence,
offering our prayers for the world that You love.

We see so much pain and suffering;
so much anger and frustration and despair.
It's easy to feel overwhelmed by the needs around us.
But we continue to bring our prayers to You in faith,
because we know that nothing is impossible for You.
You are the God who rained down bread from heaven,
and made water flow from a rock in the desert;
the God who resurrected Jesus Christ from the dead,
and who brings new life and hope to all who believe.
For You, all things are possible.
So, hear our prayers.

Lord, you call us to follow in your footsteps.
Help us to know what this looks like in each situation where we find ourselves.
Help us to know when following you means washing the feet of others,
When it means breaking down the barriers that divide people, in our homes,
in the places where we work, in the communities where we worship.
We grieve the fact that our world is divided and we ask that you work powerfully in our small lives
and our big world to break down the walls that divide. We pray especially for peace in Ukraine...
Lord, break down the walls within our lives that hold us back from reaching out to others, which
prevent us from seeing the best in other people, in other cultures, which stop your love getting in
and your blessing getting out.

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Holy One, we pray for all people who are in trouble and fear today:
For those who are sad because someone they love has died
For those who are anxious because someone is ill or in pain
For those who are lonely because someone they love is not there for them.

Lord bless: Those who are tired because they have too much to do
Those who are struggling with financial difficulties
Those who are unhappy because of an unkind word or action
Lord, surround those in need with your wisdom, your spirit, your healing and your life-giving peace.
Shape us and transform us by your grace,
that we may grow in wisdom and in confidence,
never faltering until we have done all that you desire
to bring your realm of peace and love to fulfillment. Amen.

Hymn God is love MP 187

Blessing

Go now from this service of worship to the service of God's people, refreshed by the living water that Jesus offers to you. Listen for the parched voices of the least of these; search out the dry places and the arid souls, and become for them a spring of living water. And as you go, may the blessings of the God of life, the Christ of love, and the Spirit of grace be upon you this day and evermore. Amen

The Bridgwater Drive Church sung Blessing.

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