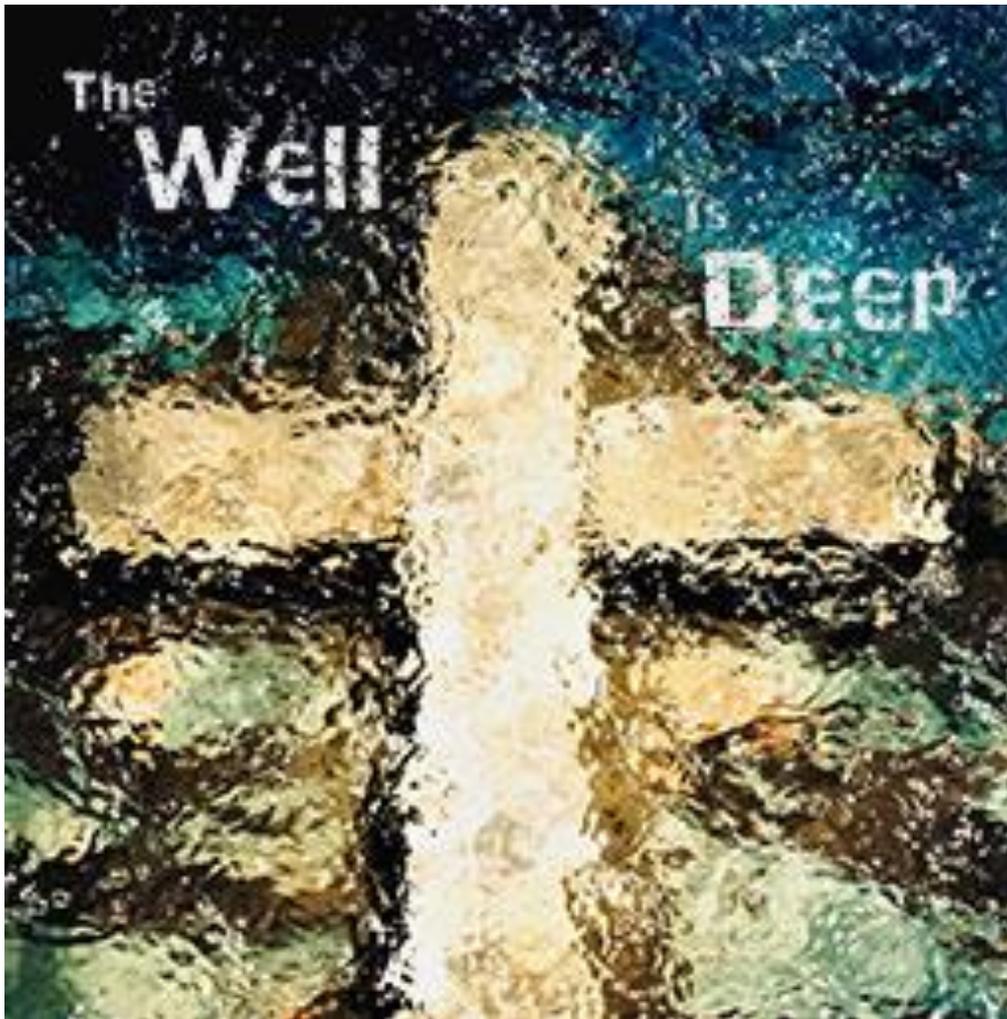


Week of Unity Book



Eight studies based on John
chapter 4 verses 1 - 42

Welcome

(from Ref Bob Fyffe, Gen sec Churches Together in Britain and Ireland)

A hot and dusty day, a stranger stops at a well for a drink. A meeting with an inquisitive woman becomes a turning point and a transformative one. It is a meeting where old suspicions, hurts and hatreds are never far away: a Jew and a Samaritan discuss what divides them. It is a meeting where ancient conventions and gender inequality are unexpectedly challenged.

Could this have been avoided? No, for Jesus was compelled to go through Samaria and in that journey he encountered a woman by a well where he asked her for a drink. Conversations such as these have the potential to change people and how they view one another. One of the most important things we can say about our ecumenical life is how our pilgrimage together has transformed and deepened our faith and also changed how we view our Christian sisters and brothers from other churches and traditions.

Can this journey be avoided? No, because we too are called by God to travel in this direction.

The churches of Brazil have given us a powerful image for this year's Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, one that reminds us of what we have learnt on our ecumenical journey, but one that challenges us to go deeper in our understanding of one another as we pray for unity of all Christians as Christ himself prayed.

Introduction

On a hot and dusty day in Samaria, Jesus is the foreigner, tired and thirsty. He needs help and asks for water.

The woman is in her own land; the well belongs to her people, to her tradition. She owns the bucket and she is the one who has access to the water. But she is also thirsty.

Jesus does not cease to be Jewish because he drank from the water offered by the Samaritan woman. The Samaritan remains who she is while embracing Jesus' way. When we recognize that we, though in different denominations, do have reciprocal needs, it enriches our lives.

This encounter between Jesus and the Samaritan woman invites us to try water from a different well and also to offer to others a little of our own. In diversity, we enrich each other.

It is necessary to go through Samaria

John 4:1-42

Commentary on verses 1-4

The negative reputation of Samaria came from its mix of races and religions. It was not uncommon to use alternative routes to avoid stepping into Samaritan territory. What does the Gospel of John mean, then, when saying, “it is necessary to go through Samaria”? More than a geographical issue, it is a choice of Jesus: ‘Going through Samaria’ means that it is necessary to meet the other, the different, the one who is often seen as a threat.

For Jews, Samaritans became a people ‘mixed and impure’. Samaritans in their turn, also had difficulty accepting Jews. The hurt of the past became even greater when around 128 BC the Jewish leader John Hyrcanus, destroyed the temple built by Samaritans as their place of worship on Mount Gerizin. On at least one occasion reported in Luke’s Gospel, Jesus was not received in a Samaritan city, simply because he was on his way to Judea. So resistance to dialogue came from the two sides.

John makes it clear that ‘going through Samaria’ was a choice Jesus was making; he was reaching beyond his own people. Maybe this shows us that isolating ourselves from those who are different and relating only to people like ourselves is a self-inflicted impoverishment. It is in dialogue with those who are different from us that we can grow.

Questions

1 What does it mean for me and for my community of faith to have to go through Samaria?

2 What might we learn from other churches?

Prayer

Risen Lord, help us to move beyond limited horizons of self, through the acknowledgement of our own sin and seeing the divine in others. In the name of Jesus we pray. Amen.

Tired from the journey, Jesus sat down facing the well

John 4:1-42

Commentary on verses 5-6

Arriving at the well, Jesus decided to stop. He was tired from his journey. While he was resting, a Samaritan woman came near the well to fetch water. This meeting took place at Jacob's well: a symbolic place in the life and spirituality of the people of the Bible.

A dialogue began between the Samaritan woman and Jesus about the place of worship. "Is it on this mountain or in Jerusalem?" asked the Samaritan woman. Jesus answered, "Neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem... the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him".

It still happens that instead of a common search for unity, competition and dispute mark the relations between the churches.

In order to attract new members, sometimes communities extol their own virtues and the benefits that accrue to their adherents. They think that the bigger the church, the larger the number of members, the greater its power and the closer they are to God, thereby presenting themselves as the only true worshippers. As a result there has been violence and disrespect to other traditions.

This type of competitive marketing creates both distrust between the churches and a lack of credibility in society towards Christianity as a whole. As competition grows, the 'other' community becomes the enemy.

Who are the true worshippers? True worshippers do not allow competition to infect faith.

We need 'wells' to lean upon, to rest beside and to let go of disputes, competition and violence. Places where we can learn that true worshippers worship in Spirit and in Truth.

Questions

- 1 What are the main reasons for disputes and competition among *our* churches?
2. Are we able to identify a common 'well' upon which we can lean, and rest from our disputes and competitions?
3. What is a true worshipper?

Prayer

Gracious God, often our churches choose the logic of competition. Forgive our sin of presumption. We are weary from this need to be first. Allow us to rest at the well. Refresh us with the water of unity drawn from our common prayer. May your Spirit who hovered over the waters of chaos bring unity from our diversity. Amen.

“Give me to drink”

John 4:1-42

Commentary on verses 7,8

Christians should be confident that encountering and exchanging experiences with one another, with other denominations, can change us and help us to reach into the depths of the well. Approaching those who are strangers to us with the desire to drink from their well, opens to us the “wonders of God” that we proclaim.

As we call upon the Lord in our need, like the Samaritan asking Jesus, “Sir, give me this water,” perhaps the Lord has already answered our prayers by putting into the hands of our neighbours that for which we ask. And so we need to turn also to them, and ask, “Give me to drink.”

Sometimes the answer to our need is already in the life and goodwill of the people around us.

Questions

1. Is there some way we could invite Christians from another church to help ours?
2. Is there some way Christians from our church can be the answer to another church’s need?

Prayer

God of life, who calls us to justice and peace, may our security not come from weapons but from respect. May our force not be of violence, but of love. May our wealth not be in money, but in sharing. May our path not be of ambition, but of justice. May our victory not be from vengeance, but in forgiveness. May our unity not be in the quest of power, but in the vulnerable witness to do your will. Open and confident, may we share today and forever the bread of solidarity, justice and peace. In the name of Jesus, who as a victim of our violence, gave forgiveness to us all.

You have no bucket and the well is deep

John 4:1-42

Commentary on verses 7-11

Everybody needs help!

Many Christians believe that they alone have all the answers and they need no help from anyone else. We lose a lot if we maintain this perspective. None of us can reach the depths of the well of the divine, and yet faith demands that we delve deeper into the mystery. Most of us cannot do this in isolation, so we need the help of our Christian brothers and sisters. Only then can we reach into the depths of the mystery of God.

A common point in our faith, regardless of the church to which we belong, is that God is mystery beyond our comprehension. The search for Christian unity brings us to the recognition that no community has all the means to reach into the deep waters of the divine. We need water, we need help: everybody needs help! The more we grow in unity, share our buckets and join together the pieces of our ropes, the deeper we delve into the well of the divine.

Questions

- 1 Where are our churches already working together?
2. What could we do in future to encourage mutual support and sharing?

Prayer

God, spring of the Living water, help us to understand that the more we join together our pieces of rope, the more deeply our buckets reach into your divine waters! Awaken us to the truth that the gifts of the other are an expression of your unfathomable mystery. And make us sit at the well together to drink from your water which gathers us in unity and peace. Amen.

Jesus said : “The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life”

John 4:1-42

Commentary on verses 11-15

From an October email to worldwide members of Avaaz:

”Cases of Ebola in West Africa are doubling every 2-3 weeks and the latest estimate says that up to 1.4 million people could be infected by mid-January. The scale of this epidemic has swamped the region’s weak health systems, eg Liberia has less than 1 doctor for every 100,000 people. Governments are providing funds, but there aren’t enough medical staff to stem the epidemic. That’s where we come in. 39 million people are receiving this email. Our polling shows that 6% of us are health workers - doctors or nurses - that’s nearly 2 million of us. If just 120 doctors among us volunteer, it will double the number of doctors in Sierra Leone. Other volunteers can help too -- lab technicians, logisticians, water sanitation workers, and transport workers. Volunteering means more than time. It means risk. Ebola is highly contagious. Health professionals have already died fighting it. But if there’s any group of people that would consider taking this risk for their fellow human beings, it’s our community. I and others on the Avaaz team are ready to take that risk with you, travelling to the front lines of this crisis.”

Thousands of ordinary people across the globe answered this call.

Concrete gestures like these practiced by ordinary people are what we need in order to grow in fellowship. They give witness to the Gospel and relevance to ecumenical relations.

Questions

- 1 What do you think Jesus means when he says “the water I give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life”
2. Where do you see Christian people providing from themselves springs of living water for you and for others?

Prayer

Triune God, following the example of Jesus, make us witnesses to your love. May your Spirit well up in us to make us instruments of justice, peace and solidarity, moving us towards concrete actions that lead to unity. May walls be transformed into bridges. This we pray in the name of Jesus Christ in the unity of the Holy Spirit. Amen

“I have no husband”

John 4:1-42

Commentary on verses 16-19

It seems that Jesus was interested in another dimension of the woman's situation. He acknowledged the woman's life but remained open to her, to encounter her. Jesus did not insist on a moral interpretation of her answer but seemed to want to lead her beyond. And as a result the woman's attitude towards Jesus changed.

At this point, the obstacles of cultural and religious differences fade into the background in order to give space to something much more important: an encounter in trust. Jesus' behaviour in this moment allows us to open new windows and raise further questions about the differences which we allow to stand in the way of the unity we seek and for which we pray.

Question

- 1 Should the church be a moral barometer, drawing a line between right and wrong behaviour?
- 2 Are there situations where the church should speak with one voice?

Prayer

Risen Lord, help us to move beyond the limited horizons of self, through the acknowledgement of our own sin and seeing the divine in others. In the name of Jesus we pray. Amen.

Then the woman left her water jar

John 4:1-42

Commentary on verses 25-28

The encounter between Jesus and the Samaritan woman shows that dialogue with the different, the stranger, the unfamiliar, can be life-giving. If the woman had followed the rules of her culture, she would have left when she saw Jesus approaching the well. That day, for some reason, she did not follow the established rules. Both she and Jesus broke with conventional patterns of behaviour. Through this breaking forth they show us that it is possible to build new relationships.

As Jesus completed the work of the Father, the Samaritan woman for her part left her water jar, meaning that she could go further in her life; she was not confined to the role society imposed on her.

In John's Gospel she was the first person to proclaim Jesus as the Messiah. This 'breaking forth' is a necessity for those who desire to grow stronger and wiser in their faith.

That the Samaritan woman left behind her water jar signals that she had found a greater gift, a greater good than the water she came for, and a better place to be within her community. She recognized the greater gift that this Jewish stranger, Jesus, was offering her.

It is difficult for us to find value, to recognize as good, or even holy, that which is unknown to us and that which belongs to another. However, recognizing the gifts that belong to the other as good and as holy is a necessary step towards the visible unity we seek.

Questions

1. In our meeting with Jesus, what are the water jars he might ask us to leave behind?
- 2 What do we find holy in our own denomination and in that of others?

Prayer

Loving God, help us to learn from Jesus and the Samaritan that the encounter with the other opens for us new horizons of grace. Help us to break through our limits and embrace new challenges. Help us to go beyond fear in following the call of your Son. In the name of Jesus Christ, we pray. Amen.

Many believed because of the woman's testimony

John 4:1-42

Commentary on verses 29,30,39,40

With her heart transformed, the Samaritan woman goes out in mission. She announces to her people that she has found the Messiah. Many believed in Jesus because of the woman's witness. The force of her witness stems from the transformation of her life caused by her encounter with Jesus. Thanks to her attitude of openness, she recognised in that stranger a spring of water welling up to eternal life.

Mission is a key element of Christian faith. Every Christian is called to announce the name of the Lord. Pope Francis told missionaries, "wherever you may go, it would do you well to think that the Spirit of God always gets there ahead of you". Mission is not proselytism. Those who truly announce Jesus, approach others in loving dialogue, open to mutual learning, and respecting differences. Our mission requires us to learn to drink from the living water without taking hold of the well. The well does not belong to us. Rather, we draw life from the well, the well of living water which is given by Christ.

Our mission must be a work both of word and witness. We seek to live out what we proclaim. The late Brazilian Archbishop Helder Camara, once said that many have become atheists because they have become disillusioned by people of faith who do not practice what they preach. The witness of the woman led her community to believe in Jesus because her brothers and sisters saw coherence between her words and her own transformation.

Questions

1. What is the relationship between unity and mission?
2. How can we be witnesses to Christian unity in our community?

There is one well of living water that makes glad the people of God. From this well we drink that we may all be one that the world may believe. The well is not ours. The well is he who warned that no divided house will ever stand. Come. Meet him who told us everything we have ever done. Come and draw from the well of eternal life.

Prayer

God, spring of living water, Make of us witnesses to unity by how we live our lives. Help us to understand that we are not the owners of the well. Transform our hearts and our lives so that we might be genuine bearers of the Good News. And lead us to see encounters with others as encounters with you. We ask this in the name of your Son Jesus Christ, in the unity of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Benediction

May the Lord God,
bless you and protect you,
fill your heart with tenderness and your soul with joy,
your ears with music and your nostrils with perfume,
your tongue with song giving face to hope.
May Jesus Christ the living water be
behind you to protect you,
before you to guide you,
by your side to accompany you,
within you to console you,
above you to bless you.
May the life-giving Spirit
breathe into you that your thoughts may be holy,
act in you so that your work is holy,
draw your heart so that you love what is holy,
strengthen you that you will defend what is holy.
May he make his home in your heart,
water its dryness, and melt its coldness,
kindle in your innermost soul the fire of his love
and bestow upon you a true faith, and firm hope, and a sincere and perfect love.

Go and Do!

Petersfield Area Churches Together are involved with the following activities:-

Chaplaincy
Christmas Lunch
Cuppa & Company
Foodbank
Holiday Club
King's Arms
Messy Church
Petersfield Counseling Services
Prayer Impact
Social Concerns
Soup Run

For more information and contact details please see www.pact.org.uk