**12th March 2023**

**Rodborough Tab**

**Call to worship**

Come, everyone who is thirsty.
Come, the lost and the seekers.
Come, the lonely and the welcomers.
Come, the sad and the comforters.
Come, the empty and the generous.
Come as you are, with your questions and beliefs.
Come and drink at the well of living water.
Come and worship the living God.





**A prayer of approach**

Lord God,
we sometimes turn up here,
so tired after a busy week.
Our minds, bodies and souls aching for refreshment.
Jesus came to the well tired from his journey.
He sought not only to receive refreshment
but to give spiritual succour.
Lord God, we too want to receive. And to give.
We offer ourselves to you so you can do
your mighty work in us.
**Amen.**





**A prayer of confession and an Assurance of forgiveness**

**A prayer of confession**

The woman at the well knew Jesus knew her, warts and all.
We come before you now, Jesus,
and sit at the well expectantly,
hearts open, ready to acknowledge our wrongdoing.
Lord, please forgive us for the times we have failed you –
unintentionally, or sometimes deliberately,
for thinking we can fool you
about the less public parts of our lives,
about the state of our heart.
Help us to humbly acknowledge that:
you know everything we have ever done;
you know when we exclude people;
you know when we don’t recognise you.
Fill our hearts with your forgiveness, Lord,
and make us ready to move forward with you.
**Amen.**

**Assurance of forgiveness**

Close your eyes and imagine being at that well where the
spring of water wells up to eternal life.
Knowing that as they were for the Samaritan woman,
God’s love and forgiveness are freely there for the taking.
Imagine being bathed in the water of life.
Tell Jesus how much you love him.



**Wells are places of significance in the Bible. The future wives of Moses, Isaac and Jacob all have their first meeting at a well. The Samaritan woman meets Jesus at Jacob’s Well, the most famous of all, situated in modern Palestine on the West Bank (now inside an eastern Orthodox church and monastery). Constructed in the rock, it is 41 metres deep – no wonder she was astonished he didn’t have a bucket; you’d also need a long rope! This is not the kind of well where you could just dip in your hand for a refreshing drink. This was a life-giving source in a dry area that required work and dedication to benefit from.**

**Experiencing being accepted.**

* **Fill the baptismal font and/or one or more large bowls with water. Have some towels nearby.**
* **With gentle instrumental background music playing, invite everyone to come and look at their reflection in the water, then to scoop a little water in their hand and let it run back into the bowl as a reminder that God invites us to accept the water of life. Allow time for people to return to their places and reflect on how it feels to be accepted by God, just as they are.**
* **End with a simple prayer, such as:
Accept the living water God offers you,
and offer God your thanks.
Amen.**

**A prayer for all ages together**

Lord, when we are thirsty
*(hold throat)*
you give us the water of life.
*(mime drinking)*
When we feel alone
*(hug self)*
you accept us into your family.
*(stretch arms to the side)*
Thank you for your gifts to us.
*(hands together)*
**Amen.**

Every now and again you might find yourself in a deep conversation with someone about life, the universe and everything. It’s rare because we British don’t talk about such stuff. We either must be in a crisis or inebriated usually. Most of life is mundane conversation – the weather, sport, holidays that kind of stuff. Then out of the blue we may let our guard down and start opening up about the stuff that really worries us, about who we are, about where we are going and if there is any meaning to it all. My brother always had an expression for those types of conversations: he would say we had a ‘deep and meaningful’. He was usually uncomfortable and flustered by it all - it was all getting deep and meaningful!

In the lectionary last week and the next few weeks there are conversations in John’s gospel that Jesus had with people which were deep and meaningful.

Last week was Jesus encounter with Nikodemus the religious ruler.

This week is the story of Jesus with the women by the well in John chapter 4. I thought I would go through this intriguing story with you and use it to make four points about encounters with people who are looking for something more in life, possibly looking for faith.

We all know the Christian church is tanking in Britain. It is getting old and declining by and large. Can we grow? If we are to grow, we need to find new ways of telling our story and connecting with people, getting beyond their preconceptions of us and touching their real needs. Getting deep and meaningful in other words.

**John 4.4-7**

 Do you notice that John writes that Jesus ‘had to go through Samaria to get to Galilee from Judea? It is a short cut but most devout Jews avoided it because there were cultural, religious, political animosity between the Jews and Samaritans. But Jesus decided to travel through Samaria He made a deliberate decision to break down barriers of prejudice and mistrust. Some even see Jesus’ route as a protest against the stubborn refusal of the Pharisees to mix with people beyond their faith. Jesus’ decision gives me the first point;

***Are we prepared to deliberately and strategically go to where people are in order to share our faith?***

We may expect people to come to us, to come to church, to find faith – not that we have to go to them. We convince ourselves that it’s far easier to keep quiet about our faith. It’s easier just to mix with Christians who share the same values and same beliefs. We don’t expect people to be interested in our faith. Perhaps we fear that we’ll be regarded as some religious zealot so we keep quiet about our faith. Where are our Samaria’s? Where are our no-go areas? Because the Lord says ‘GO’.

In our Gospel story about the woman at the well who meets Jesus in John 4 one feature that is often noted is the isolation of the woman. She is drawing her water at noon (the hottest part of the day), probably because of the hostility with which she was treated by her fellow villagers.

The anonymous woman is triply marginalized: a woman in a male-dominated world; an outsider in the eyes of Jews; and a sexually unconventional person to her own community.

Collecting water in the heat of the day, (it was about noon verse 6) rather than early in the morning with the other women, is a sign of her ostracism. This low-status woman embodies the story of her people before this Jewish man: impure because of their mixed race, immoral because of their idolatry, outside the line of descent, traced back to Abraham through King David.

We are having a discussion after this service about same sex marriage. The churches attitude to people of different sexualities is a huge barrier to people in our culture hearing the gospel.

A recent survey of young people aged 16-25 reported that when asked what comes into their mind when they think about church, the overwhelming response was ‘anti – gay’ and ‘prejudiced/bigots’. Where are the young people in our churches?

I also think we got our reading of scripture wrong and have badly misunderstood the supposed condemnation of homosexuality in the Bible. But you can discuss that with me later!

*Are we prepared to deliberately and strategically go to where people are in order to share our faith?*

Samaria may also be social barriers.

After leaving university I became a community worker for a church in Nottingham. It brought me into contact with a number of wonderful individuals in the community who were doing a lot of good work. One woman, who we will call Doreen, was a real community activist. A mother of five she was well respected by everyone in the community and she was a focal point for much community activity. One day I got into conversation with her about going to church and she said that she didn’t feel good enough to go to church. She said she knew her faults and failings and she saw these people entering church dressed up in their Sunday best and she didn’t feel good enough. ‘People like me don’t fit in there’. she said

Now Doreen, got terminal cancer. The whole community was in grief. Her husband didn’t know how to handle it all and banned anyone from coming to see her. I wrote her a card except I took the risk of including on the card a psalm that I had chosen for her. In other words it wasn’t your usual, sorry to hear your news we’re thinking and praying for you. The psalm I’d chosen was Psalm 91:

*‘whoever goes to the Lord for safety, whoever remains under the protection of the Almighty can say to him ‘you are my defender and protector you are my God in you I trust’ He will keep you safe from all hidden dangers and from all deadly diseases. He will cover you with his wings; you will be safe in his care.*’

I had read this psalm during my quiet time of prayer and bible study. As sometimes happen when you are asking God for guidance, it jumped out from the page at me. It was hugely risky to put it in a card. But I took the risk. And I popped it through her door.

Doreen rang me and asked me to round. She said she had tried other faith healers and alternative therapies but to no avail. Could I help her? Well I said I couldn’t but God could. I shared the gospel with her and said that there are no guarantees in life but what ever happens we can be safe with God and live without fear in the knowledge that nothing can separate from the love of God. Can I know that she said? I said ‘I believe you can. Would you like me to pray for you, would you like me to pray for Jesus to make himself real to you in your life and for you to know the reassurance of his love?’. She said yes. We prayed and she came over all shaky and started to glow and felt a deep peace. She said she felt as though someone had touched her.

I came back the following day with some bible notes on the 23rd Psalm. Her husband was all bemused by this. The next day she was admitted into hospital where she died within two days. Her husband and family didn’t want anything to do with me after that but I do believe she died in peace.

People think they don’t have a need for God until they have a need for God and suffering is sadly, one of those times. It is usually out of desperation and pragmatism – you’ll try anything to get well. Jesus got loads of people coming to him in need. What is amazing is that he didn’t demand much from them in return, just blessed them and was gracious to them and tried to point them in a more wholesome direction. When you know people are ill or in need, just the offer ‘would you like me, or my church, to pray for you, can break down barriers.

Where is your Samaria?

Let’s continue replaying the scene from Jesus life as He comes upon his second turning point.

**John 4.7-10 …**

Jesus treated this woman with respect. He didn’t shun her as a Jewish man approached by a Samaritan woman would have been expected to. But he gave her time and consideration. We will never get into conversations with people about our faith unless we make time for them. Have them round for meals, go out with them, and do sport with them, whatever. But then crucially Jesus decided to turn the conversation from the routine to the spiritual.

***My second point: Are we prepared to turn conversations from the routine to the spiritual?***

Jesus took advantage of the circumstances that they found themselves in – they were talking about water, so He used ‘living water’ as an analogy for God which aroused her curiosity. After which he unfolded his message slowly at a pace she could take it in.

When I was a social worker I remember one day we were in the office at the end of a very stressful day. My self and some of my colleagues had been involved in a difficult case and we were all exhausted and strained. One of my colleagues, Linda, asked me if I was OK and how was I going to cope with the stress. I said instinctively what I would honestly do, ‘I’ll have a hot bath and I’ll pray’.

Immediately she was curious about the role of prayer in my life. Do you find prayer helpful? How do you pray? Does God answer your prayers etc?

Maybe because I was stressed I hadn’t put up my usual inhibitions about sharing my faith. I had just responded to her innocent question honestly and instinctively. I’ve had to learn over the years not to be defensive nor apologetic for the richness and the blessing I feel I have in being a Christian. So long as you don’t come over all sanctimonious and holier than thou, and you are real, people will, I’ve found, more often than not, be fascinated by your faith and experience.

We have swallowed hook line and sinker, the attitude that one shouldn’t talk about religion because no-one is interested. Well they may not be that interested in you going on about church and institutional religion but I bet they are interested in how your faith helps you cope with life, how you deal with stress, where you fijd happiness and hope, cope with guilt, offer forgiveness, choose between right and wrong.

When we listen and get to know other people, we’ll come across natural opportunities to allow spiritual topics to flavour our conversation.

Not so long ago I was speaking to someone who was bemoaning the fact that there is no sense of community today. No one cares for anybody else. No-one looks out for you. We are all alone in society.

I agreed to some extent. I said yes we all live very individual lives and often don’t know who our neighbour is. But then I added ‘I’m just glad I belong to a church’ .

I left it at that and allowed this person to take me up on the point. They did. They took the bait. They went on to ask why am I glad to belong to a church and having asked me the question I had permission to answer knowing that I would have their attention because they asked the question.

I was not being manipulative. I was being honest. I’m extremely grateful for the church. Despite all its faults and failings it is a place where we are committed to look after each other, sometimes admittedly clumsily. But we do stand against the tide of our self obsessed individualised society. And I am happy to tell others of that treasure.

The stuff of our lives, the experiences of our lives, will be the stuff that God can use. When you have been through adversity how did your faith help. When you have been low did your faith bring you through? Can you say a word about that when someone shares with you a problem and then asks you what can they do? Where can they get help?

 I know a business executive who when asked the question ‘How’s your year going?’ will sometimes reply ‘My business life is going really well, my family life is doing OK and my spiritual life could be better. Which one do you want to talk about?

The person will normally reply ‘’well, uh, tell me about your business life’. But a signal has been sent out that could set the stage for a future spiritual conversation.

We make split second decisions all the time to either play it safe or just be honest about what makes us truly tick. Friends, may I encourage you to be bold enough to be more honest about your faith and not be afraid of turning routine conversations to spiritual ones.

After Jesus began talking about living water the discussion unfolded:

**John 4.16-19**

It seems that up until now, the woman was intrigued by what Jesus was saying, but she may have thought he was a little odd with all this talk about living water. She may not have been taking him very seriously. However, Jesus came to a turning point and decided to produce evidence that would bolster his credibility. He told her about her personal situation and she realised she had to take him seriously.

***My next point is that we need to engage people seriously and offer a reasoned account of our faith and answer their objections*.**

Jesus of course could give supernatural proof of his identity – you could say he cheated! But we have to be able in the words of. First letter of Peter 3vs15 ‘always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give a reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect’

Intellectual barriers are in many cases easy to deal with. You just have to put the effort in to listening, reading and working out your response. People reply ‘I wouldn’t know what to say!’ That’s not an excuse – it’s an admission of laziness. Go and work it out. Take your questions to your minister. Read up on the issue there are loads of materials and resources to help you tackle the intellectual objections to the Christian faith. There are always arguments and counter arguments – you need to work out for yourself your response.

We all need to work out our faith – what is our good news – do we really believe it. And sometimes when you are engaged in genuine debate it will make you think through things as much as the person you’re trying to convince.

Whilst at university in my early twenties, I met up with one of my lecturers in the bar and we got into a heated argument. At one point he challenged me and said if he didn’t believe what I believed would that mean he was going to hell.

I said ‘Yes I believed it would mean he was going to hell. (Imagine telling you lecturer he was going to hell - bang goes my grades!)

He replied by saying that I was talking about a God of love and the supposedly ‘good news’ about Jesus. Yet there is an undertone of menace and threat about it. Would God really damn him because he couldn’t believe everything I believed? Was salvation all about ticking the right boxes, signing the pledge? His conversation with me sent me away to think deeply about fear and punishment and salvation. I’m still thinking about those things. My faith is evolving and changing as I reflect on my experience, how I see life and God and how I read and re-read the scriptures.

Engaging in the business of sharing your faith, genuinely and openly, will change you as you work through the questions and the doubts people raise.

All I can say is don’t be afraid – as Peter says ‘Set apart Christ as Lord in your hearts and work out your reasons’. Have the courage to believe that all truth is God’s truth and have the integrity to go where the Spirit leads you.

I had an atheist friend at university who was constantly challenging me, asking me questions, provoking my beliefs. Yet he did so because he was pursuing truth. If you have friends like that, embrace them – they are wonderful.

This friend eventually became a Christian. He thought his way there because he was primarily a thinker. But he also needed to be open emotionally and spiritually to make a step of commitment and faith.

We had gone through many questions – he could see reasons for faith. At one point I was getting tired of all the procrastinating. How many more questions have you got? When will you be satisfied? You have surely got enough to go on.

And I challenged him with Anslem’s dictum that ‘I believe in order that I can understand. Can you see enough to make a step of faith, which is not a blind leap of faith; but real understanding (and ultimately we will never understand Christianity without the Holy Spirit enlightening our eyes) real understanding often only follows faith.

Fortunately the challenge to him came at the right point when he was willing to make that step of faith. Hearts and minds are involved in conversion. Conversely, it is difficult to worship someone if your mind or heart has rejected them.

We can’t argue people into faith but we can help them in the process by responding to their questions and providing reasons that there might be something about Christianity for them.

Many people will throw intellectual barriers to avoid pursuing the truth and get you off their case – they throw them up to protect themselves against having to change their views and beliefs.

The worse sorts are the apathetic ones who couldn’t really care. Sometimes the supposedly intellectual barriers are just a smoke screen because they know the moral cost of following Christ would be too much for them.

I knew someone who enjoyed having sex with as many women as possible! It was his hobby to go out at night and try to return home to his flat with a woman. Yet, as often is the case, he was also spiritually open. There is often a close link between sexuality and spirituality: both are seeking intimacy and love, meaning and purpose and it is no surprise that Jesus had more

openness from the prostitutes and adulterers and the sexually

promiscuous of his society than he did from the religious ones who thought they led moral lives.

This friend would talk with me at length about faith and God. He believed: but he wasn’t prepared to change his lifestyle. He preferred to stay with the transitory pleasure of sexual liaisons rather than go searching for the love of God.

 I don’t know where he is now. But I can only hope he is one of the Prodigal’s who are determined to wander off to the far country to do their own thing, to seek their own pleasure, and hopefully when they have had their fill, and realise it doesn’t truly satisfy them, God brings them to their senses and gives them the living water to quench their thirst.

The final point I wish to make about this story is the woman’s response

**John 4.28-30**

The Samaritan woman makes a decision so quickly she drops the water jar and rushes back to the town to invite people to come hear Jesus themselves. ***The final point is that those who have heard and received good news should have an urgency and compulsion to share it.***

As time goes by you can get stale and complacent in church. When I feel that my passion for sharing my faith is subsiding I need to take some time and review in depth what my life was like before I met Christ.

I was going nowhere and he rescued me from a life of irrelevancy and an eternity of despair. When I think of the adventure I have had in faith so far, my gratitude begins to well up inside me and I say to myself ‘I know people who have got to experience that! That grace consciousness motivates me once more. And like the Samaritan woman who brought people to hear Jesus sometimes it’s a partnership. We just try and bring someone to a place where they will hear the gospel. Maybe it’s to church. Maybe it’s on an Alpha Course and despite all its limitations the Alpha Course allows people to explore the Christian faith in a non threatening environment over the space of over ten weeks. No one off on the spot decision. But one off decisions do happen!

Last story - when I first arrived at University at the end of fresher’s week the Christian Union had a big evangelistic meeting. I was getting ready to go out to it when the guy in the flat opposite me said ‘where are you going?’ I said ‘oh I’m just off out.’

‘Out where. ‘

‘I’m going to a meeting’

‘What sort of meeting?’

‘A big meeting - to hear a speaker – lecture kind of thing’

‘O what’s it on?’

‘Well, err - the Christian faith’ – I said coughing

‘Well I’m not doing anything he said. Can I come with you?’

‘Err, well - are you sure – it might not be your cup of tea.’

‘Let me be the judge of that’ he said.

Mike came along to that meeting and accepted the invitation to receive Christ into his life at the end of the meeting. I was utterly gob smacked. He left university in his first year to go and help in inner city London. He wanted to get involved with the poor. He then felt he should devote his life to working with the world’s poor and went back to University – this time at Birmingham –to study development issues. Last I heard he was out in India.

Never underestimate what God can do with our pathetic attempts at witnessing to the gospel.

*Where is our Samaria?*

*Are we prepared to be honest about our faith and potentially turn routine conversations into spiritual ones?*

*Can we give a reason for the faith we have and help people overcome their barriers?*

*If we have heard and received good news and the grace of God can we find the urgency and compulsion to share that good news with others?*



**Prayers of intercession**

God of wisdom, we pray for those who thirst for knowledge. Bless researchers seeking to find ways to eliminate disease in order to bring healing and hope to sufferers and their families. Guide and inspire them that they may be encouraged and successful.

Quench their thirst
**with your living water.**

God of mercy, we pray for those who thirst for justice. We hold before you those who work in the courts and the whole legal system. May they be conscientious in pursuing the truth that justice may be applied even-handedly to all who seek it.

Quench their thirst
**with your living water.**

God of peace, we pray for those who thirst for peace. We remember all those who are suffering as a result of warfare and civil strife. We especially commend to you the people of Ukraine in their desire to live peacefully in their own nation.

Quench their thirst
**with your living water.**

God of compassion, we pray for those who thirst for healing and restoration. We hold before you all aid workers especially those working alongside the victims of the earthquake in Turkey and Syria. Give them wisdom, insight and strength to meet the needs of the day and the vision to build for the future.

Quench their thirst
**with your living water.**

God of love, we pray for those who thirst for your presence and your healing touch. Be near to those who are sick in hospitals and at home and those who care for them. Give them patience and strength to carry on and may the assurance of your presence bring them hope.

Quench their thirst
**with your living water.**

May all your people gathered here receive the thirst-quenching power of your living water that we may be renewed, restored and re-invigorated for our discipleship.

We pray in the name of Jesus who offers living water to all.
**Amen**



**A gathering prayer**

Lord, we are drawn to your well
to seek the water of eternal life.
Refresh us with your Word.
Surround us with your Love.
And fill us to overflowing with your Spirit,
the water of life,
that we may never be thirsty.
**Amen.**

**A prayer of adoration**

The woman recognises Jesus for who he really is.
The Samaritans hear that Jesus is the saviour of the world.
They can’t help but believe.
May we see today that you know us, Lord,
through and through.
May we hear that you are our Saviour,
be astonished by your amazing love and acceptance,
realising that you have always known us.
Praise you, mighty redeemer.
**Amen.**

**A prayer of praise and thanksgiving**

Sometimes we think we know our place.
Exactly just so.
And everybody else should know theirs.
Exactly just so.
As we go into a new week,
help us to realise that life isn’t actually
‘exactly just so’.
It can be expanded beyond our wildest dreams.
Lord, this week we want to be astonished,
to accept everyone in your love.
We want people to believe because of our testimony.
For people to hear it for themselves, through our lives.
Thank you for giving us our best life in you.
**Amen.**



**A sending out prayer**

Thank you that we are accepted.
Thank you that we belong.
Thank you that you give us the water of life to drink.
Help us to be accepting of others,
and invite them to drink your water too.
**Amen.**